

Surreal Grotesque

issue 2



Letter from the Editor

Dear Freaks and Weirdos of the Grotesque:

Thank you for joining me for another spawn-filled issue of bizarre and disturbing things. The reaction to the first issue has been very encouraging and made me not lose hope that perhaps this magazine was too "high concept" or just plain weird for some. I believe there is a healthy amount of the population that does enjoy horror and understands that horror in it's various incarnations is just a part of everyday life. We see horror on the news, we see horror in some of our life experiences so why relish it? Why raise it up on a pedestal? That is the criticism I have received much of my life for being a fan of this misunderstood genre we call horror but not surprisingly those who often criticized me for my love of the things macabre were the ones with the darkest secrets. People who hide behind bottles or bad marriages or secret depressions, these are the people who are first to criticize and point the finger at the arts & entertainment world for being unable to control their own children or their own lives.

My goal with this magazine is not to give the darkness power or elevate pain to some spiritual state of consciousness but merely to highlight the macabre and use it as a catharsis point for mental healing. I think we all have our demons to purge and horror or surreal or bizarro or the writing grotesque helps us to do that. There are some great stories in here. The Long Halls of Dead Days shows us the danger of becoming addicted to one's own madness. The Bones of Miracles by Nik Korpon is a fun crime noir piece with a dark ending. While The Fallen by Mark Grover is genuinely creepy, Bibliomancy by Harlan Wilson, Candy by Carlton Mellick provides a brief respite from the darkness. Lovely, Fearful Symmetry blurs the line between love, obsession and desire. Not to mention our first model, a lovely young woman called "Princess Nightmare" who takes us into her Wonderland fantasy and the awesome art of Joseph Whiteford who is a cross between Tim Burton and Maurice Sendak on crack. Just when you think you have had enough, Sander Jansen and Adam Graham will take you even deeper down the rabbit hole.

Prepare for loading. The ride is about to begin.

Surreally Yours,

Daniel Gonzales, editor

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G R O W



The Long Halls of Dead Days

Jayson Roland

I. Manic

Behind my eyes there is an itch I can't scratch, I haven't slept in days and I imagine digging them from the socket with my bare hands. Four days have passed without sleep and the room is spasming in soft seizures. That terrible redness is crackling around inside my skull like living rot and I can almost feel the blood vessels moving and splintering into the whites of my eyes like little trees seeking nourishment. Unborn fetuses hang off the branches of the blood vessel trees, growing and pulsating inside gelatinous sacks waiting for consumption. Eighteen pictures so far and I'm working on number nineteen as the clock blinks 12:00 until I can feel it in my brain throbbing. My hands are gnarled and look like dried roots withering away, paint accumulating under my fingernails. Somewhere in the apartment complex there is a woman singing but it is far away like a tiny porcelain ballerina hiding in the walls.

It has been days since I have gone into work, why would I want to work in an office when I have God in my apartment? This is what Michelangelo must have felt like when he painted the Sistine Chapel, the monks who set themselves on fire, Jesus pleading on the cross but accepting his fate or Van Gogh's eternal starry night. I can't remember the last time that I have eaten but my stomach has stopped complaining, there is a sort of euphoria that comes with starvation, the way an African child's belly bloats with emptiness. A new state of enlightenment has come over me, I feel immortal. There is no fear of death now because life goes on forever and ever. Amen.

Jill keeps calling me on the phone and says she is worried about me but I can't be bothered with her right now. A few hours pass and she is at my door knocking. I hide in the darkness and wait for her to leave. Her shadow in the hall torments me, for a moment I imagine that she is a demon trying to destroy me. She wants to stop the art from being created, she is my demon lover, a succubus sent to mislead me from my true purpose. I look through the peephole as she stands there in tears, my hands are shaking and I begin breathing hard.

"Devon, is that you?" she says.

I say nothing and press my back against the door.

"I can see your shadow, Devon, I know you are there," she says, angry now, "Did you stop taking your meds?"

I cringe at the word, so clinical. Meds, like she is a doctor, like she understands what it is like to live on multiple levels of consciousness. I can see God and the devil and live among the mere mortals too, all she can do is breathe her simple air and live her simple existence.

"I had to paint," I say and my voice sounds strange like a monk speaking after years of self-imposed silence.

"Devon, you know what happens when you stop taking your meds."

“I can’t paint with them,” I tell her. “Don’t you understand, I have to create things. I am an artist.”

She sighs, “Sometimes I don’t know why I put up with this shit. Listen, Joel told me to give you this, it’s his card. He said to come by the gallery and bring your portfolio. He is interested in doing a show with you but don’t go if this is how you are going to act.”

“No, please, people have to see these!” I beg her, “They need to be born. They are still in the fetal stage.”

She slides the card under the door, “Call me when you are back on your meds.”

I give her one last glance through the peephole, she wipes away tears and walks away.

For a brief second I see the gleam of a silver band on her finger against the dull yellowness of the hall light. It’s hard to believe she is my fiancée and that I gave her that engagement ring three months ago, it seems like a lifetime ago.

The next day I show up at the gallery with my portfolio and I have managed to bathe, run a comb through my hair and look somewhat human. A feeling of complacency comes over me, there is no need for worry, he will have to recognize my talent or he is a fool. This is beyond him, this is all predestined.

Joel is a tall, built and attractive guy in his mid-30’s with a strong jaw and perfect facial structure. He looks like one of those models on billboards that you think are airbrushed because you don’t want to believe there are people that perfect. He has that five o’clock shadow on his face that gives him a rugged look but the professional demeanor of a distinguished gallery owner. He has to be at least six feet tall and looms over at my small stature of 5’6. It is intimidating the way he towers over me. He could crush the life out of me with those hands. I imagine him choking me and release a small nervous laugh.

“I have heard a lot about you from Jill,” Joel said, “She is a very lovely woman.”

“Thanks,” I say, wondering why he is mentioning her. She is irrelevant right now. All that matters is the art, it must be seen by others.

“She says you paint some amazing stuff.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, let’s see it then,” he grins like a man who has seen many great talents and many great boasters but is still deciding which one I am.

When he opens the portfolio he is silent for moment and it makes me nervous. I am afraid he is going to shut it and tell me that it’s not good enough or not quite what he is looking for. Just the thought of that fills me with immediate despair. I imagine going home and taking the handgun out of the drawer and blowing my brains out. I will put a canvas in back of me when I do it and make it my last piece of art. Then everyone will realize how brilliant I was.

Yet he doesn’t laugh at me. Instead a long slow grin spreads over his face lighting it up with maniacal glee.

“These are amazing, it’s almost Lovecraftian. Each one is like looking into another world, another reality that we shouldn’t be able to see.”

“I know,” I say, smiling, “The muses were kind to me.”

“It was great to meet you,” he says, “Bring your stuff by tomorrow afternoon and we can go over the details of a showing.”

“Thank you.”

A feeling of elation comes over me, it was all worth it, it is real.

II. The Downward Spiral

Days have passed, I am cutting pieces of skin off my foot and burning them into candle wax. It is as if the entire universe has shifted and is wrong now. The Gods have left the building and I’m starting to realize it was all a lie. Nothing matters, it’s all bullshit, there is no God, no afterlife, nothing means anything but the meaning we force upon it. I think of all the people dying of AIDS and cancer, people being raped and murdered right now in this exact moment, people suffering and shooting drugs in their veins. In the scheme of things, art is worthless, it is just another way to make pretty the ugliest lie of them all: life.

I cut deeper into my skin with the blade and blood streams down my foot. I watch my foot bleed as tears run down my cheeks. The emptiness inside my heart is large and painful. Seven years ago the doctor diagnosed me as bipolar with obsessive-compulsive tendencies, since then I have been on a variety of medications: Paxil, Zoloft, Wellbutrin, Seroquel, Prozac, Depakote and Lithium but nothing ever lasts.

For months at a time I am fine and then I get nervous, I can’t paint, I can’t get inspired so I stop taking them and that’s when it happens. That is when the light pours in and I have those brief flashes of brilliance, the ecstasy of creation touches my skin like the fingertips of strange angels but then I always reach this point. The darkness, the fucking soulless emptiness returns to consume me. All the light and good has been sucked out of the world and all I can feel is the psychic pain of billions of souls. I feel like I’m dying by the second, I can feel my skin slowly rot and I can just sit there staring at the wall for hours while opera music plays in the background like a scene out of Fatal Attraction.

My cat purrs next to my ear and rubs its warm body against my cheek. There are eighteen bowls of cat food on the floor for him and they all seem to be half-full. Exodus likes lot of choices, he is my only true companion. In my bedroom there is a pile of garbage about three inches thick from the floor. I haven’t seen my rug in weeks, there is mail down there, bills, candy wrappers, fast food bags, newspapers, magazines and old suicide notes.

I missed my follow-up appointment with Joel at the gallery. He left a message on my machine and said he still wants to meet. He must be used to flaky bipolar artists.

I don’t call him back. Just the thought of picking up the phone and talking to anyone makes me physically ill. Running water in the bathtub for hours, I sit there and listen to the sound of the water and watch it go down the drain in a endless loop until I feel myself go into a trance. I think of my mother’s coffin being lowered into the ground as a child and watching my father die in the street after years of drug abuse. His body frozen and stuck to the pavement like a dead cat, my grandparents took me in and raised me after that. They were so naïve though, had no idea that my Uncle was molesting me until I was sixteen and attempted suicide for the first time.

I have forgotten to pay my rent, an eviction notice is taped on the door. It is one of those pay within ten days or vacate warnings, it’s all bullshit though, you can go to court and they have to give you sixty days if you claim mental illness. I send Jill a text message and she says she will pay it online for me if I start taking my meds again. I text her I will then flush the pills down the toilet just to spite her. I decide to eat a small salad but by the time I get to the fridge I have lost my appetite.

There are bloody fingerprints all along the wall, I have cut my hand but I can't remember when or how. I am so tired, everything is so meaningless. I stare at the paintings and I am disgusted with them. I take a knife from the kitchen and start to stab one of them until it's in shreds on the floor. It feels so good that I stab another. I consider lighting a fire and burning down the apartment. I imagine putting the kettle on the stove, making myself a nice cup of tea and sitting on the couch as the whole place burns around me. That would make a pretty picture.

I don't do it because I'm not that far gone yet but the image comforts me and reminds me that there is always an escape.

A week later I manage to get myself together enough to bring ten of the paintings to the gallery in my car. My prescription for Wellbutrin and Zoloft are in a bag next to me on the passenger seat, I swallow two pills whole with a bottle of water and vow to never go off of my meds again. In the car there is a song on the radio that I remember from my childhood, I turn it up really high and start singing to it. Before I know it, I am smiling again and laughing to myself. It feels so much better, life will be good again. I call Jill and tell her that I will meet her for dinner that night.

When I get to the gallery, Joel is at the front and smiles at me.

"I was worried that you might not make it," he said.

"I'm sorry about that, I got really busy," I told him, "Sometimes I get lost inside my head so deep."

"I am used to the artistic temperament," he grins. He is always smiling as if he hasn't suffering a day in his life.

He is marveling at the pictures up close, telling me how beautiful they are and how he admires my use of color. He tells me that he thinks I have an amazing career ahead of me. His hands are on my shoulders and my back and before I know it, we are snorting coke together in the backroom. I know I am not supposed to be doing other drugs with my meds but I can't say no to him. He entrances me with his eyes, they hypnotize me. If he told me to pull out a knife and stab myself, I think I would, his eyes are that powerful.

"So I'll see you on Saturday," he says.

"Sure, 7pm right?" I ask him.

"Come half an hour late, they love that," he says.

He promises me a big show, he is going to invite everyone who matters in the art world and celebrities with lots of cash to throw away. Outside on the sidewalk I look up at the building that says: Fassbender Gallery of Art and see it as a beginning. Jill will be there too and I am cautiously optimistic.

III. Rapid Cycling

"I've missed you so much," Jill says, kissing me on the neck.

The past month has been a blur and I can't remember the last time I have seen her face to face. I showed up for work the other day and my boss said that he fired me three months ago but I couldn't remember. Jill tells me that I have been on unemployment for the last few weeks and that I am largely living off my savings. She has access to my trust and been paying most of my bills and taking care of me every time I fall into darkness. Jill is an art director and puts together shows like this all the time. I think that is how we met, I can't be sure. I

can't even remember when we got engaged, there are so many spaces missing in my brain from the drugs, the epiphanies have blocked out the moments of mundane.

"Well, I'm back on the pills," I tell her, "But I am still adjusting."

"This show will be really good for you. It could launch your career. I see the start of good things," Jill says and smiles that sweet smile of hers. Her lips are taut and painted red, I kiss her and feel a sensation of pride that I have her on my arm.

There are dozens of people at the showing, famous faces I recognize and a few celebrities. A blonde socialite is talking with Joel, some rich bitch who is famous for being a famous and has never worked a day in her life. He motions for me to join them. When I approach, he smiles and introduces me to her and she fake-smiles and asks me about my piece. I tell her it came to me in a fit of inspiration.

"It was a nod to Eastern religion, the Dali Lama and also a protest against the Apartheid," I say and she eats up every word.

"It's amazing," Blonde Socialite #1 says, "It's like seeing into the eyes of some religious guy."

I stare at her blankly waiting for the air to whistle through her ears and smile at Joel. Her skin is tightly stretched, she has to be no more than twenty two but already getting Botox shots. I imagined pulling her skin with my hands and ripping it off her skull. I giggle a little and she stares at me.

"How much is it?" she asks, a diamond necklace hanging between the swoop of her silicone breasts that is probably worth more than this entire building in real estate.

"Thirty thousand," Joel says, casually before I can speak.

"Is that all? What a bargain," she says, "I'll take it. You are a real talent."

The picture is of a doll with the word JEW written on it, being decapitated by a little girl with a Hitler mustache. Is this the painting we were looking at? It seemed to have changed. I wonder if they can see the same thing I am. She mentions crosses and angels, I see demons laughing in the shadows. They mention a use of pastels but all I see is darkness.

I smile at silicone tits again, grinning like the Cheshire Cat and Joel motions me into the back room. We do some coke and I'm drinking wine and laughing and my head is throbbing as it mixes with my pills, I think of the words PSYCHOTIC BREAK on the warning label if taken with alcohol or illegal drugs but keep socializing. He is introducing me to people who really seem to think they matter, I imagine them all being eaten by maggots and I am able to stomach their bourgeois existence. The night is flying by at an astonishing pace, my head feels like I'm flying and I see face after face and words keep pouring from my mouth but I have no idea what I'm saying. I mention Van Gogh, Dali, Picasso as influences and see nods and people smiling. I talk about Van Gogh cutting off his ear for a prostitute and compare it to my art. They smile and laugh, I make a joke about syphilis and they applaud. Everything seems to be going wonderfully then I see the something crawling out of one of the canvases. I move close to Jill, trembling.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Can you see it?"

The black slithering creature moves like a human Jell-O mold encased in black ooze crawls by people's legs, its forked tongue licking the insides of women's thighs and they just stand there, chatting away.

"See what?" Jill said, "What are you seeing? Are you having hallucinations again? Should we call Dr. Baer?"

"No, I meant, can you see the turn out tonight? It's amazing!" I say a bit too loudly.

I close my eyes and whisper the words *This is not real* but when I open them, it has come closer, it's lecherous tongue wrapped around Jill's neck.

"What?" Jill says, staring at me.

My hands are trembling, trying to pretend not to see it licking at her, mucus dripping from its mouth onto her shoulder.

"C-can't you feel it?" I say to her.

"Feel what?"

It rubs its body into her skin and starts to crawl inside of her. Black boils break out across her face and black veins through her arms. I run away from her, the room is spinning and then I hear the other voices. The canvases are coming to life, calling to me. I see tendrils moving and growing but no one else seems to notice as they twine together. Vines grow out of one canvas and bud small flowers with mouths that look like vaginal openings. Please God, I whisper and then the pictures start writhing. Demons and angels with translucent flesh and ethereal bodies float towards me like wafts of smoke. They all want inside my head, I put them on the canvas and they want back in my head. A dead woman smiles at me and offers me her heart. I see the champagne glasses fill with blood, the entire room is transforming into a nightmare, entering some parallel world.

Joel motions to me.

I join him again as he introduces me to a couple from Germany. I try to pretend everything is normal as Joel's face is evaporating, a giant vacant hole is visible where his eye used to be.

"I was just telling them about your inspiration for this piece, maybe you could enlighten us."

I try to clear my head and turn to a blank canvas. I'm stammering and Joel is staring at me intensely.

"What do you see?" I ask.

"Well, it's a forest and river landscape on the surface but then you see the small fish people crawling out of the water. I was wondering if you could give them some insight into what inspired it."

The blank canvas mocks me, I wonder for a moment if they are all playing a joke on me and suddenly the room will burst into laughter.

"Fuck you!" I scream and run out of the gallery.

My entire body is heaving and I run into the streets where cars are honking at me. A grandmotherly woman with a face like a ferret calls me a cocksucker. My entire body has broken out into a sweat and I'm ripping my clothes off because I am so hot, I'm burning up and then I'm shirtless. It feels like needles are poking into my skin. In the alleyway there is a prostitute who is having sex with a John, they turn to me for a moment then

continue fucking. I am close to throwing up but I haven't eaten so all that comes out is bile. My cell phone is ringing, Jill's picture pops up but I ignore it.

She texts me a few minutes later: What the Fuck?

The world is spinning and a police officer is cruising by with his flashlight. The whore and her John run but I am standing there shirtless and somehow shoeless now. The officer turns on his lights and motions to me.

"What?" I say to him.

"Come here," he says, angrily.

I run then, feeling scared that he wants to hurt me and then he is giving chase and follows me down the alleyway where I run into a gated fence. I climb over it frantically, cutting my arm on the barbed wire fence then climb up a fire escape and go in through an open window three stories up. Someone is sleeping in the bed and I creep through the bedroom, careful not to wake them. I see flashing lights below, he is calling backup. I run through the small apartment in the dark feeling roaches underneath my feet, the smell of alcohol and rotten food around me. Through the broken door of the apartment and into the hall where a woman looks like she is banging her head against the wall, a little girl is playing with a dead rat and there is another apartment with the door open and a girl is giving a guy a blowjob. The elevator is broken so I have to take the stairs down to the first floor, the cop is talking to the superintendent, so I run out the back but the window won't open. I hear the woman say, "He went in there!" and I start to panic, hives have broken out on my arm, sweat and a sour taste in my mouth. I use the full force of my body to shatter the window and jump through it, there is a piece of glass in my arm but I keep running with it inside me. There is blood pouring down my chest and I panic, I have broken out in a full fever and the world is turning into shattered fragments of purple and green. Triangular shapes twist my vision and suddenly I am in front of a liquor store. A woman comes out and I ask her for help, she starts to scream as she sees the shard of glass sticking out of my arm and the blood on my chest and I smile and tell her its okay I'm an artist. I vomit on her clothes and shoes and I start laughing because her mouth is a perfect oval and then there is a foreign guy with a turban threatening to kick my ass and call the cops and—

I wake up in a hospital where I have soiled myself. A nurse is cleaning me off.

"Where am I?"

"You are in the hospital."

No shit, I think, "Yes but how did I end up here?"

"You had a seizure," she said, "You were brought in by paramedics."

My head is throbbing and a sense of terror floods over me.

"I have to get out of here! I have a gallery show going on! Please let me go!"

That's when I notice that I have a handcuff around one of my wrists and I start to panic, screaming.

The nurse calls in two orderlies who hold me down as she fills a syringe with a clear liquid.

"You need to rest," she says and then my body goes numb.

In the blackness of my sleep, I hear a voice say, "We are going to have to put him on a 72 hour hold."

IV. Slow Dissolve

A month later and I am still in the hospital. They had to commit me after I bit the nurse's arm and called her a cunt. In the hospital the hours move like days and the world seems strange and bright. Slowly I feel myself healing like skin over a burn victim's body. It is still tender to the touch and infested with puss but new. The doctors have put me back on a regime of pills and I feel myself stabilizing. Jill came to visit me today and cried a lot. She wasn't wearing her ring. She said she misplaced it.

She did say that Joel wasn't angry, in fact, the buyers loved my little display and five more pieces were purchased that evening. Apparently a suicidal artist is gold on the open market. If I offed myself, my pieces might be worth a fortune.

He wants me to paint more once I get out of the hospital.

The doctor comments that this is the fifth time that I have been committed in three years. It doesn't seem like that many times. The months just go by so quickly and then years, time seems so meaningless.

I am free to return home after six weeks.

Jill has hired a maid for me and my apartment is clean when I get home as if nothing ever happened. They even scraped the filth on my bedroom floor and new tiles have been laid down. Jill is always getting my messes cleaned up for me.

She is always good for that. The money I made from the art show has been set up in a trust and Jill has a hold of it and gives me a card with a spending limit. She doesn't trust me with money and for good reason, on one manic high I spent ten thousand dollars in one weekend on furniture I didn't need or want.

I make myself a cup of coffee and sit there, staring at a blank canvas hoping for the motivation to create. Two weeks pass and I've spend two thousand dollars on art supplies and maxed out my credit limit. Jill refuses to increase it. She has someone bring me groceries so I can eat, she has been appointed my guardian as part of my release agreement that I am unable to care for myself. Jill likes the idea of me but not the reality.

The hours drag like dead bodies tied to a car bumper.

All my inspiration is gone. There are no visions. I can't paint on the pills and Joel wants to see the new pieces by next Friday. A nurse comes by every day for a few hours to check on me now, I smile and tell her I am fine, I eat food and swallow my pills so she can see. Then I go to the bathroom and make myself vomit until I see the two capsules floating in the toilet.

It may take days or a week at most but the visions will return. It always starts out like an electric current that flows through your mind and then you feel a tingling sensation on your arms and on the back of your neck. Then the walls start to breathe and you realize everything is alive, that's when you grab the strings of consciousness that hang like gossamer threads in the air and pull. The threads tear the very fabric of reality open into bite-sized pieces that can be consumed by even the simplest minds. This is the kind of inspiration that changes the world and makes the history books. It is also the kind of art that destroys people in the end but the art is all that matters, not our individual lives, I am just the vessel. I open my mind, close my eyes and let the muses speak through me. It is a matter of faith and possible insanity. Yet we persist and pray to invisible deities.

It's a scary thing to know you have become addicted to your own madness.





The Bones of Miracles

Nik Korpon

With the barrel of a gun trained on him, Mr. Chan blinked once and stifled a yawn. The man in the Reagan mask cursed and jabbed the muzzle into his cheek, pulled it back and gave him another fair view of the gun that threatened to paint the bamboo wallpaper of his store a vibrant shade of grey matter. Mr. Chan wasn't nervous, though, and it gave his eye the look of a target, concentric circles of iris and undilated pupil. Cartoon noises seeped from the apartment above them. He wondered if his daughter was still watching Looney Tunes. He swallowed a laugh, an image of himself with a finger stuck in the barrel of the gun and Reagan with wisps of smoke curling like errant hairs—his own private Daffy Duck cartoon—lodged in his head. In the back room that served as both a storage space and the Chan family kitchen sat four large simmering pots.

The summer breeze blew through the holes in the burlap curtains hanging in the windows. Reagan startled, checked behind him, pushed the muzzle of his gun further into Mr. Chan's wrinkled cheek. Hung from the ceiling by braided thread, thirty-odd sets of wind chimes knocked against each other, a hollow soulful noise like a wooden xylophone. The tone echoed off the cracked tile floor the color of dried bone and a tsunami of funereal sound waves filled the room.

Although the rest of the neighborhood was round-eyed, it was his wind chimes that gave Mr. Chan his reputation. The carving was so exquisite that a man from the Visionary Art Museum approached him once, offering a place in the self-taught artist exhibition. He later declined, citing the store's long hours and the lack of anyone else to run the business. But it was more their tone than the artistry, the way they turned a person to a lump of gooseflesh, froze their blood into pellets, that made the chimes renowned.

Lured by the hope of establishing a comfortable life, the Chans settled in Baltimore. The city wasn't big enough to support its own Chinatown, though, and after a brief stint as a cook, he managed to piece together a life for him and his wife by hocking stalks of lucky bamboo and chopsticks emblazoned with the Buddha's image. Endless months crept past, filled with white rice dinners and powdered grape drink more lilac than purple. He re-dressed the pots of bamboo, promised virility and wealth and prosperity. The customers, though, seeing a shop filled with the magic bamboo yet run by an anemic man and a barren woman wearing a dress patched with newspaper, chose to stick with the more reliable cigarettes and Boh Boy scratch-off tickets. Three times during a single spring, Mr. Chan gave his wife their bowl of rice and went hungry after a robber had made off with the cash drawer.

'Open the register,' Reagan said. He cocked the gun again to show that he wasn't going to take any crap and checked his pocket-watch. Mr. Chan counted the bills individually, squared off each pile. The wind chimes sounded their tone and Reagan cringed, tried to cover his ears, muttering to *shut those fucking things up*. A brief sizzle in the back room when a pot boiled over. Eyebrows furrowed, Mr. Chan glanced over his shoulder to see why the simmering noise was louder and bit back a smile. Wedged between the lid and the pot was a swollen thumb.

'I said hurry up!' A dull crash and Reagan spun around, swinging his gun wildly as if he was aiming at particles of dust.

‘Cat,’ Mr. Chan said without looking up. The muzzle against his forehead, he pointed at the ceiling. ‘Our cat likes to play on the bookshelf.’

‘Just give me the money,’ Reagan said. He exhaled a fierce breath through his nose, dug his face into the crook of his elbow. ‘Fucking stinks in here.’

Several further re-dressings and the bamboo finally fulfilled their promise. A picture of the Chan’s infant daughter assumed a prominent position in the store, thumbtacked above the register. Like water seeping through sand, the register began to fill, though whether because of the magic bamboo or his constant public adulation of young Sue, he wasn’t sure. An extra pack of cigarettes here, a quarter in the penny tray there. One woman pulled her jacket lapels over her crucifix necklace as she bought a plaster statue of the Buddha. Small miracles sustained Mr. Chan, while the family bowl of rice sustained young Sue and Mrs. Chan.

Though looking comprised of mainly reeds and wet sand, young Sue did grow. Mrs. Chan cut burlap rice bags lengthwise and hung them in the windows. She embroidered the edges with a family pattern, using mint dental floss. Mr. Chan happened on a bright yellow pile of discarded tiles when returning from the park one day, and piled them in the shopping cart that functioned as car and baby carriage. Sue helped remodel, picking lilies from a neighbor’s rooftop garden. Tiny chattering and an ethereal floral scent filled the store. Every night Sue ate her fill of rice, and Mrs. Chan would go hungry only twice more. After her last missed-meal, their business would begin to grow as quickly as their daughter.

‘Don’t forget the safe,’ Reagan said.

Mr. Chan shook his head, said they didn’t have one. He smoothed fallen grey hair back over his exposed scalp. A wet thump in the back room. A second pot had boiled over, and sitting on the food-splattered range was a chunk of flesh, waterlogged and drained of color.

‘Bullshit. You always got one. Where else would you put the money?’

‘Ancient Chinese secret.’

Reagan slammed the butt of his gun into Mr. Chan’s cheek, put the muzzle back in his eye. ‘I said give me the rest of it.’ Mr. Chan rubbed his face, letting the tone of the wind chimes soothe his throbbing cheek. Reagan’s gun danced in the air, his ragged breathing audible through the mask, and covered his ears.

‘I said shut those things up!’ He lashed out and tore two wind chimes from the ceiling. Pale beige shards covered the floor. Peasant scenes and fu dog battles, curtailed early. Rivers cascading over rocks, divided into trickles. Mr. Chan shook his head and sighed. He whispered a prayer while Reagan stomped the pieces to crumbs and, in the time it took Reagan to smash another piece, Mr. Chan sunk the Fleur-de-Lis end of a fireplace poker into Reagan’s temple.

#

Sue had hit her growth spurt several years earlier than her friends and the Chan family bowl of rice seemed to be shrinking. Mr. Chan sucked at the bones of miracles in order to give Sue extra rice, which still wasn’t enough. Sue seemed

to keep the same mass but change dimensions. She grew vertically and shrank horizontally. Mr. and Mrs. Chan only withered.

A week after her last missed-meal, Mrs. Chan took Sue to play in the park. Moments later, a man with a stocking over his face barged in and ransacked the store. Mr. Chan's hands trembled as he collected the money, equal parts fear and rage. He was at a loss to where he would find more rice for his daughter—or even miracles for himself—and it wasn't until the man with the stocking face ripped the picture of infant Sue from the wall that the Zen ocean washed over Mr. Chan and everything focused to a single point: the tip of the Fleur-de-Lis end of the fireplace poker leaning against the wall.

With the man's feet still post-mortem twitching, Mr. Chan dragged the corpse of the stocking-faced robber into the kitchen. He heard noise upstairs and hoped that Sue had only forgotten to turn off the television. The absence of footsteps led him to believe that they were still at the park. At the thought of her name, though, panic snaked its fingers through his chest and forced a sweat to his face. He scurried around the room, emptying cabinets, dumping out drawers, checking behind the refrigerator for a secret passageway he hoped he'd always overlooked. Anything to hide what had just happened and protect his family. Hands knitted over his head, Mr. Chan stood in the middle of the floor clenching his eyes, trying to will away the body. A large pot teetered on the edge of a shelf, causing a minor heart attack when it hit the ground. He tossed it on the stove and resumed pacing the room. Sunlight streamed through the open window and glinted off the set of knives he'd bought on the promise of a job as a chef. He stood still, looked at the body, at the pot, at the knives, at the body. Through the heartbeat in his ears, he listened to the television noise upstairs to make sure he was in fact alone. He took three other pots from the cabinet, then splashed water over his face, swallowed hard and picked up a knife.

He finished in under an hour; his stint as a cook had lasted only two weeks and his knives were still sharp. Three times he paused to steel his nerves. After mopping the floor, he locked the doors and went upstairs to take a scalding shower. He took the family out to dinner that night, an event usually reserved for Christmas or Sue's birthday, and stopped by a pawnshop to buy a hot plate for the apartment. When Mrs. Chan raised her eyebrows, he explained that he'd seen a rat in the kitchen and no one was to go down there until he removed it. One of the windows in the pawnshop had been smashed and the owner covered the hole with plywood and magazines. As Mr. Chan explained the infestation to his wife, Sue drew on her face with a marker. She pointed at a page from National Geographic, pictures of African tribesmen wearing lavishly carved bones through their noses.

Reagan was heavier than he appeared. Knowing this would be a lengthy ordeal, Mr. Chan drew the curtains and locked the front door. A silver pocket-watch fell from Reagan's pants. Mr. Chan breathed on it then polished it with his shirt. There was engraving on the back. *To John Jr.: Stay true the path and capture The Dream.* He shook his head and whispered a prayer over John Junior's body, then wrapped the watch in a handkerchief and set it below the cash register. In the kitchen, he covered his face with a towel and scooped bones from the pots with a strainer spoon then set them on a towel to dry. When customers joked to each other about the smell, he'd always nodded and smiled in a way that said *I don't understand what you're saying* and never bothered to correct their misconception that it was just the way Chinamen smelled. He poured the liquid into buckets and set them aside to cool, then put on rubber gloves and went about dividing John Junior into pots.

When John Junior was busy simmering, Mr. Chan climbed the fire escape to his neighbor's rooftop garden and poured the buckets of sludge over the soil. Some time ago, they'd marveled at how well his fertilizer worked. Ancient Chinese secret, he'd told them. It had been his way to repay them for not scolding Sue when they caught her taking their lilies.

The garden fertilized and the bones drying to be carved into wind chimes the next day, Mr. Chan went to the market and

bought three carrots and a stalk of celery. He joked with the owner for a few minutes, a heavy Romanian man who felt a sort of kinship with Mr. Chan. Like with the Chinamen smell, he never bothered to tell the man that he was really born in New York, not China, because the man found so much joy in telling post-Communism horror stories. He laid a few coins on the counter and bid the man a good evening, then returned home to shower and cook dinner for his family.

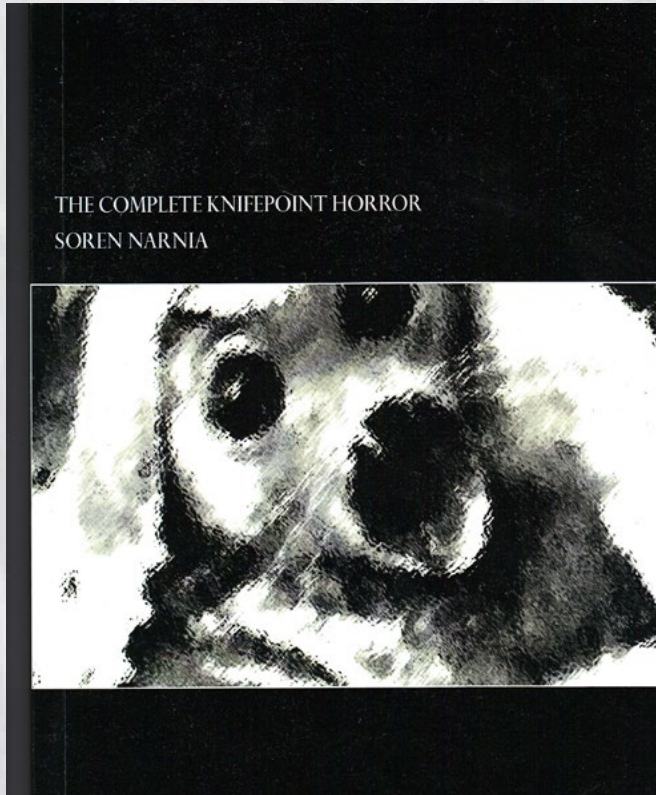
About the Author

Nik Korpon is the author of Stay God, By the Nails of the Warpriest. and Old Ghosts. His stories have bloodied the pages and screens of Crime Factory, Shotgun Honey, 3:AM, Out of the Gutter, Black Heart, Speedloader, Warmed & Bound and a bunch more. He is an editor for Rotten Leaves Magazine and Dirty Noir Magazine, and the co-host of Last Sunday, Last Rites, a monthly reading series. He lives in Baltimore. Give him some danger, little stranger, at <http://www.nikkorpon.com>.



NECRONOMICON

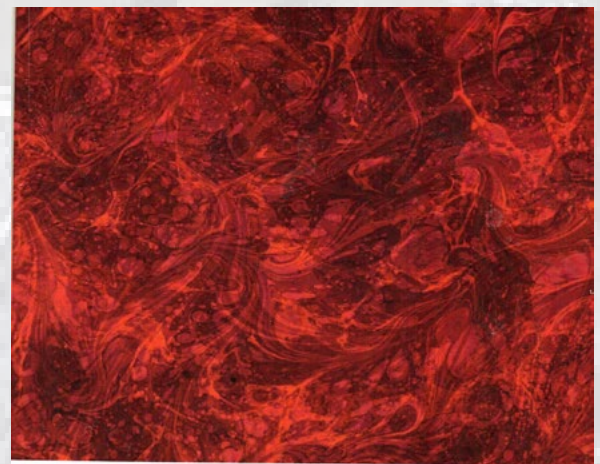
Book Reviews for Evil Bastards by Daniel Gonzales



Yet overall, “Song of the Living Dead” is a fun read that really grabs your attention and plays with the idea of the living dead in a less than serious way. The complete “Knife-point Horror” on the other hand is a series of short stories all told in a very raw, minimalist format that takes everything away but the interior thoughts of the narrator. While it is a format that may be visually striking to some and annoying to others, Soren takes away all capitalizations and paragraph format to deliver a streaming experience. The stories read like litanies of thought much in the same way that an Edgar Allan Poe story would read where you are seeing just through the eyes of the narrator and the world falls away.

The book attempts to create a more primal form of storytelling to “create a single voice describing events exactly as it experienced them”. It is this taut, first person prose that gives the stories their power. The book has its share of supernatural disturbances but never reaches any Lovecraftian proportions. It is more of an individualized experience of horror for each character as they deal with their various corners of hell. The untitled stories read like confessions or even something you could read about the campfire.

In a world of bland, predictable horror, it is nice to find an author who keeps things fresh and original while using subject matter that may feel very cliched and overdone. There is no doubt that the current zombie apocalypse trend has reached “Twilight” proportions or worse yet, “A 50 Shades of Grey” mania. It seems like everyone wants in on the walking dead trend and thinks they can do it better than the last guy. So Soren Narnia decides to not take the subject matter completely seriously in “Song of the Living Dead” but gives us more of a stream-of-consciousness style hopping inside the mind of random characters to give their perception of the situation. While it may not be as popular as “World War Z” or “Monster Island” or even “Pride and Prejudice and Zombies”, it is a mockumentary-like vision of the zombie apocalypse giving us perception of everyone from an army general to a homeless man. There are points where it even goes into a screenplay format.

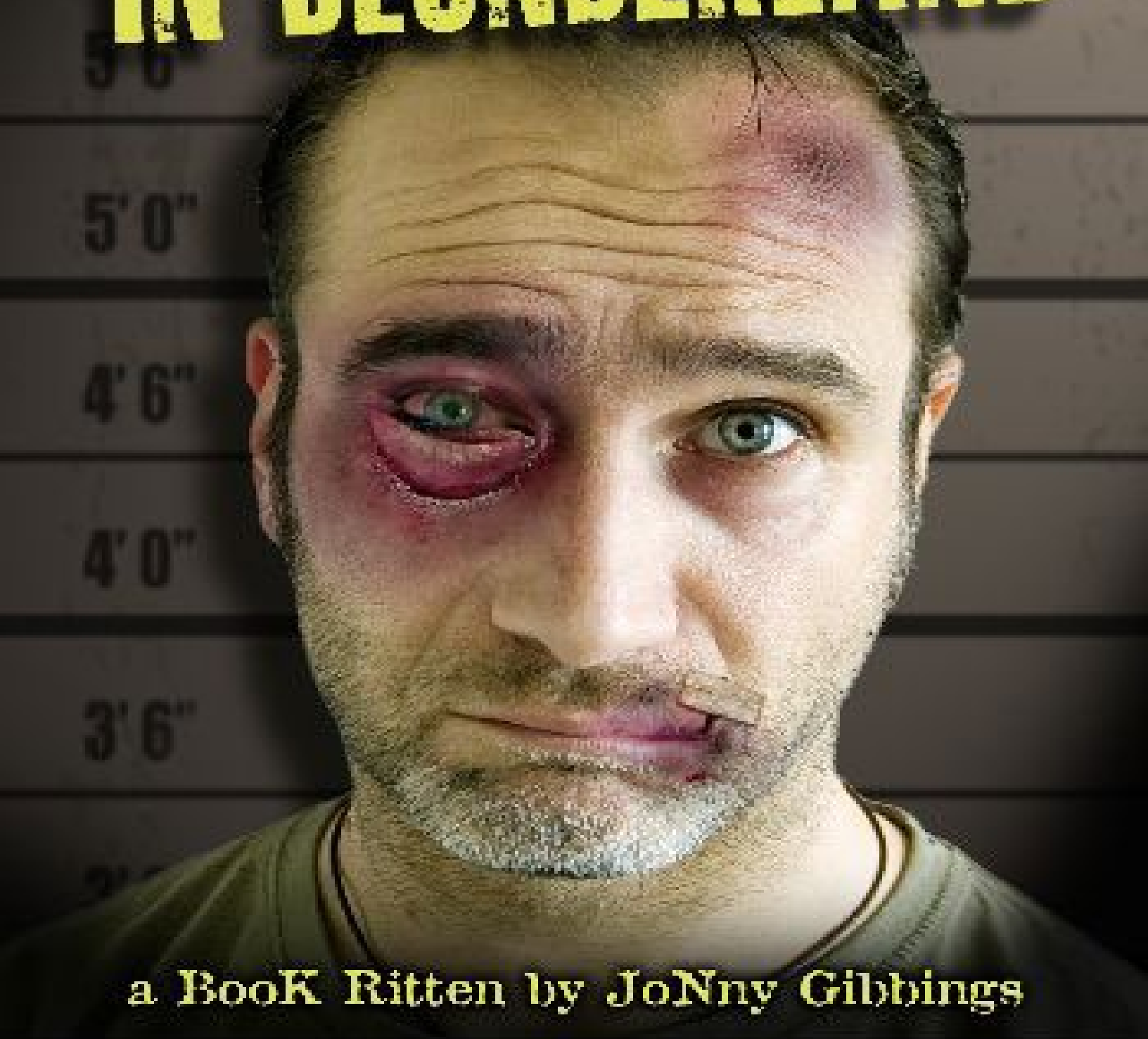


Song of the
Living Dead
S o r e n N a r n i a



<http://soren-narnia.com/>

MALICE IN BLUNDERLAND



a Book Ritten by JoNny Gibbings

MALICE IN WONDERLAND



A FANTASTICAL ADVENTURE BY
PRINCESS NIGHTMARE



Courtesy of Bombshell Pinups













The Fallen

Mark Grover

I will die before I tell Rhonda, my fiancée, and her mother what happened when I was twelve. Not long after my dad taught me about sex, my mother had another child. The baby was born at home, its muffled cries coming from the bedroom. But it didn't last long. Mom and Dad stayed in there a while, dad running back and forth to the kitchen, searching the cutlery drawer, and grabbing towels from the linen closet. I pressed my ear to the wall and remember Mom growling like a dog. When they finally came out, Dad was guiding Mom by the shoulders. She convulsed and threw up the color of red meat into a towel as they walked past me. Dad *said* he was taking her to the hospital. No need asking about the baby. My dad carried it wrapped in a shroud.

I'm left wondering if my baby will be born healthy. What few kids are left wandering around this town are emaciated. Our schools days are shortened because the government cut funding around these parts. Once I gather up enough money, we'll leave here. Rhonda found out a few days ago she was pregnant, and since I wanted to do the responsible thing, I asked her to marry me. The polite thing to do when a proposal is accepted is to meet your future mother-in-law. I knew there'd be trouble as soon as we pulled into the yard filled with mud caked gnomes and the storm door banging in the wind. Maybe I should have been a good sport, lied, and said "yes" when Rhonda's mom asked if we'd be eating the placenta after our baby was born. She leaned forward and snorted more than breathed, excused herself as she flicked the perspiration off her head and complained about how the humidity made her sinuses act up. She can keep her white-trash tradition.

I pulled myself up from the seasoned sleeper-sofa and said, "No." I did a self-guided tour of the house on the way to the bathroom.

Lower back pain slithered up my spine to my shoulders, hit my neck. My throat tightened. A knot formed inside and I couldn't breathe. The taste of bile sat there. The knot crawled up, and I gasped for air. My face burned. As I stumbled past Rhonda and her mother, they cackled at me.

Rhonda ribbed her mother. “You should have let me reveal that family tradition to him more tactfully, Mom.”

I couldn’t stand straight. Only saw the dog hair plaster the corners of the floor down the hall. Fetid smells of kitty litter curled into my nostrils. Cat tracks wetted the linoleum. Her mother’s bedroom door ajar. Parrots squawked with speckled newspapers draped below them. Potted plants were cluttered against the wall and gnats hummed.

I pushed the door open and dented the plaster on the wall. Inside the crusted bathroom, my left hand fell on the lavatory, the other grabbed hold of the towel rack. My ribs almost busted. My knees buckled. I knocked hair color off the shelves above the toilet. Emasculated, fetal, I spewed poison into the toilet.

The memory surged back to me in violent flashes like the lights of a semi coming over a hill. My dad was so prepared when I asked him about the facts of life. They told us in school to go home and have our parents tell us where babies come from. Dad taught me with a farm cat’s miscarriage. Life pink and raw, four little legs with blood vessels, pulsing sacks attached to them. Was the closest thing to human form Dad could think of. I ran and got a shovel from the tool shed to bury the faceless kittens. When I returned, dad was zipping off to get the rest of the chores done. Mama cat licked her slimy face. The stillborn were gone.

“Don’t worry,” dad said. “They do that when they’re born without faces.”

That didn’t give me the know-how to be ready or expect my own to be growing and basting in Rhonda.

I sat for a moment and caught my breath. Rhonda pounded on the door. “You okay, honey?”

Pushed myself up from kissing the throne, I pulled some toilet paper off the roll, found some cleanser in the cupboard, and cleaned up after myself. When I got back out to the living room, I told them both the wedding was off. Rhonda’s mom shouldn’t have asked me that stupid question. Sometimes you just don’t know until after you meet the future mother-in-law with her broken guitar string hair and hands resting contented over her stretch pants and calculatingly rubbing her interlocked fingers together while she grinned at me like I was dinner. I bolted past them out the warped storm door and down the steps to my Corvette. Once I was in the car, Rhonda jumped off the porch with a rabid face.

“Come back here and be a man, you bastard!” She pounded on my windshield as I back out of the rutted

driveway.

####

I couldn't marry Rhonda because I was scared I would hurt the baby. I didn't want it to endure what my baby brother did that night Dad took my mother away. Rhonda's mom thought it was cowardice, and she tracked me down, tied me to a chair in the basement, managed to have some ugly thugs kidnap me the day of Rhonda's birth. Had the delivery day down just right. The light above seared my forehead, sweat glided down my cheeks. The town was practically a ghost. We were out on a country road where no one could hear us. My stomach jittered, my head muscles taut. Crazy bitch had the thugs strip me down, my balls hung over the edge of a chair, a slick blade almost nicking them where Rhonda's mom had secured a razor with duct tape.

"Don't squirm too much, dear. It will be messy." Rhonda's mom said as she rubbed the back of Rhonda's shoulders. She then poured in buckets of warm water for my child soon to be born. When Rhonda had first told me she was pregnant, I was excited. I had books picked out for it that I would read at night. Later, I just wanted to cringe. I wanted to be far away.

Funny how a little thing like afterbirth can make you remember. They couldn't have saved my own mother, but they were smart enough to suppress my memories. Dad was vigilant about poking pills down each morning once I started asking questions. He said they were vitamins. My mom never came home from the hospital. When I asked Dad why she died, he said she'd just turned. She was like an animal that had become sick. Then, I asked him why she couldn't get better. Doctors didn't know what it was.

Rhonda screamed. The water splashed over the edges of the pool. Blood surged into the water. Her mom told her to push, push, and push. Her grunting echoed off the stone walls, hit my ears, made the hair stand on the back of my neck. Her mother brought Rhonda up on her knees. Told her push some more, keep her knees bent so gravity could gently bring it out. The tip of the baby's head moved out, Rhonda's mother massaged the pink crown, encouraging. I want to think there is hope while I can.

I pushed the chair back with my feet and fell headfirst. My head curled into my chest. Rhonda's mother jumped up and towered over me like a gray bull. I thrust the chair forward with my legs and hit her bulbous knees. She lost balance, and fell back in the pool with Rhonda. Rhonda pulled back as her mother's

fall splashed Rhonda's face. There was an agony and a joy in Rhonda's face that made me squirm, made me struggle to be close to her. I saw the blue cord trailing out. I could only see the tiny baby legs. Her mother was laying there, catching her breathe.

"Get out, bitch. You're going to crush my baby!" I screamed.

Rhonda's mom winced, gasped for air, pulled herself up.

Rhonda bent forward to pick up the child and hold it to her breast. She looked back at me, her forehead wrinkled with worry. Our newborn grasped at her breast, its lipless face trying to suckle. Everything that was inside Rhonda filled the pool.

I tore the tangled rope that had held me in the chair away from my shoulders and legs. I ran over and embrace her from behind. "I'm sorry, Rhonda. I was afraid. Stay with me, please."

As I held her, she began to hyperventilate, sniffed the air like a panting dog. Her cheeks became gray. I sang *Hush, Little Baby*. She started to growl, drooled. We both looked her mother's way as she stood paralyzed.







André G. 2010

Eyeballs Growing All Over me Again!

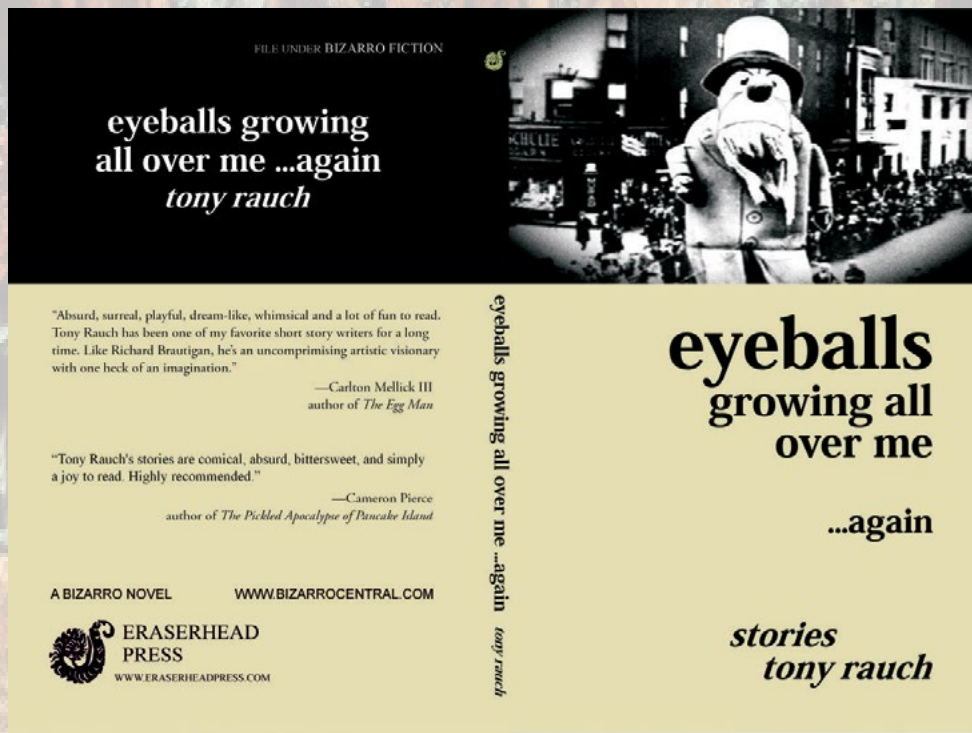
A book review by S.T. Cartledge

You know that brand of horror that is not so much frightening as it is weird? Think of Goosebumps. Those books are simple, poorly written pulp/trash horror for kids. They've got some reasonably good ideas (albeit somewhat cliched) and decent (formulaic) plot twists. Basically, the books are real page-turners for kids. People have said about the Avengers movie, that it's got all the action of a Transformers movie, but it's a well written and well made movie, too. If you replace Transformers with Goosebumps and Avengers with Eyeballs, that's kind of how I relate to the book.

It's not really about kids being frightened by the paranormal. I think it's more the fact that really weird things are happening to normal people ('normal' = 'American middle-class suburbanites'). And sometimes those people are school kids. Like in Goosebumps. And the things that occur to these people have that weird factor that starts as a mild curiosity and transforms throughout the story into a colossal mind-bender. It's a cultural horror, a whole other world of quirks that seem dangerous or frightening on the surface, but beneath all that, they're usually quite harmless. It's like going to a carnival and wandering down the hall of oddities.

When I started reading this book I read the first couple of short stories, enjoyed them, read them on a surface level, and left it at that. You've got everyday people discovering things that shouldn't belong in the world. Like the jars of pickled fetuses that obviously look fake. A trick of the light. The carnies trying to pull a trick and make a quick buck. The characters Tony Rauch writes about react to their abnormalities in different ways. This is most apparent in the title story, Eyeballs Are Growing All Over Me... Again!

I didn't think much of it at the time, but when I came back to the collection months later (procrastination getting the better of me) I became like the characters in his stories, and like the people at the carnival. Doing the double-take and having a closer look.



Yes, there is an army of clones growing in that kid's neighbour's basement. Yes, that kid has a team of miniature football players that seem to be alive. Yes, there are eyeballs growing all over him... again!

Once I made that double-take, I had to finish the collection. Rauch's writing is so fluid, he teases the absurd out from the mundane lives of normal people. The stories and characters have a strange fascination that grows on you. He builds dramatic tension so well that once you're in his world, you're stuck with the characters to the end. Like the pickled punks in the jars, you need to read everything, study them from every angle, to know whether or not they're the genuine article.

This short story collection is proof that Tony Rauch is the genuine article.







LOVELY, FEARFUL SYMMETRY

THERIC JEPSON

“No, no, Janice. Not at all. I’ll keep her right by Perry.”

Janice handed Dom her oversized glass bowl and he carefully carried it across the room to his Ikea dresser, lacquered black and stenciled in gold by an old boyfriend, and placed it carefully on a small circular quilt he’d made from his grandmother’s famous orange muumuu. The water sloshed back and forth a bit but nothing splashed out. The goldfish, a large brilliantly red specimen, moved slightly up and down in the waves and seemed to stare at him directly. Dom blew it a kiss, then blew a second kiss to Janice. She switched from the sucking-on-a-quince face he thought she’d finally abandoned to a small smile. Dom bent his head in acknowledgement then tripped back and took her into his arms. They touched only at the shoulders and Dom’s right knee bent his foot into the air.

Janice kissed his cheek. “I’ll miss you both so much.”

“Oh, please tell me I’m better company than your fish!”

Janice laughed at his pouty face. “Of course, Dom. Don’t be silly. But if it weren’t for Saffy—” She bit her lip, stretching out the new scar across her philtrum, and held onto his biceps. “Listen. Dom. I haven’t told you because of—what happened before. And you’ll think I’m silly, but if it weren’t for Saffy—! I wouldn’t be going to Paris with Theo today. So just—just be careful what you think around her the next six weeks, okay?”

“Janice! You’re scaring me!”

She laughed and pushed her single strand of pink hair back into place among her natural brunette.

“Forget it. Just—remember what I said.”

Now Dom laughed. “I always forget what I remember! It’s why I’m such a good gossip!”

Janice smiled, double-kissed his cheeks and slipped out. Dom watched her through the keyhole as she

walked between his door and the elevator three times until finally the elevator doors closed behind her. He shook his head, stretched. A pause at the radio (lucky: the dj was promising three songs by Christopher Cross in the next forty minutes) then a dance back to the dresser. He undid the buttons on his rotten-apple cardigan and pulled off his black tshirt and looked in the mirror behind the fish—Saffy and, in a larger rectangular tank, his piranha Perry. He flexed. For years Dom had tried to build up weight but to no luck. He would get strong, but he never put on mass, just bundles of wires under his dark skin. But a couple years ago he decided he didn't want to be a huge bodybuilder type so much as to have and to hold one. And that could still happen.

He turned his attention to Perry. "Perry, this is Saffy. She's Janice's goldfish and she'll be our flatmate for the summer. Capiche?" Perry swam in short right-angled bursts and ignored him. Dom loved how ugly he was. His asymmetry. The scars along one side. Like a retired prizefighter who needed Dom to massage his muscles and stroke his hair and feed him breakfast. In his ugliness, Perry was the most beautiful thing Dom had ever owned. As if on cue, Lionel Richie asked if it were he Dom was looking for and Dom said Lionel knew it was and he walked directly back to take a shower. After drying off, Dom found himself again before the fish. He bent over and stared into Saffy's face. She was too perfect. Too symmetrical. Too evenly red. Even the streetlights through the windows reflected off her scales uniformly.

"You're like me," he said. "Too beautiful." He straightened up and looked in the mirror, taking a few steps back and flicking on a floorlamp so he could see himself clearly, from mid thigh to crown. He had only put on short-short silk boxers. The lamp shined lightly upon his dark skin, throwing his well defined chest and abs into stark relief. The way his neck moved into his perfect shoulders was enough to give himself an erection. And his face— Dom had never needed modesty. He was exactly as beautiful as he thought he was. He believed his eyebrows were perfectly shaped because they were. His cheekbones were as high as the documentary on sex appeal said they should be. His lips—

He was someone every boy was willing to kiss but no boy dared falling in love with.

Dom covered half his face with one hand (a perfect hand, slender fingers perfectly proportioned to the size of his palm) and sighed. "I should look more like Perry. A few scars along one side. No one trusts a face more perfect than the soul it clothes."

This was an old lament for Dom. An old theory about outsides needing to match imperfect insides. He hoped someday age would bring wrinkles and sags that would let him be loved and not merely an object of

conquest.

“Anyway. You see how pathetic I am. Tenzing always calls me his sad little Adonis. It’s a wonder my friends don’t all hate me.” He slipped a hand into his shorts and scratched. “Anyway. You must be hungry.” He walked back to the fish, tapped some flakes into Saffy’s bowl then walked to the kitchen and grabbed some hamburger from the fridge for Perry.

Perry dove into the burger with his usual ferocity. Dom stroked his chest as he watched the fish. Something about that ugly monster tearing into a piece of meat—it was simply the most masculine thing Dom had ever seen.

Dom brushed his teeth, showered, and dressed in the dark-gray, raw-silk suit a recent lover had given him. Dom was unsure about the fabric but the cut was exquisite. He admired himself in the mirror then took off the coat and went into the kitchen to make a smoothie to carry on his walk to The Fancy Friend. Nothing like sucking a straw to calibrate his fellow pedestrians’ gaydar.

He cut a peach in half then tossed it and some ice and a handful of spinach into the commercial blender Tim had stolen for him from Chez Shay. He turned it to high, picked up his knife and walked to the sink to wash it off.

Then two things happened at once, dividing his attention. The blender started making awful clunking sounds as if it had a rock against its blades, and a sudden acrid smell of smoke hit his nostrils: he had left the burner on low under his heavy-bottomed aluminum pan. He pulled the blender over to him and pried off the lid, forgetting to turn it off and spraying ice and peach guts and spinach all over himself. He sputtered backwards then jabbed with the knife at the caught pit in the now-frozen blades as the blender’s motor screamed. The pit came free immediately and the blades returned to thirty thousand rpm and he felt the knife wrenched from his hand. Dom knocked the blender away from himself as he slipped on the peaches and ice. The knife shot out of the blender and ricocheted off the tile and back across Dom’s face. As he fell, he reached out for something to grab and landed palm first in the popping aluminum pan, which followed him to the floor, landing on the ear behind his freshly cut cheek and sliding down his neck into the puddle of peach-and-green ice where it hissed at him. Dom screamed and clawed as the burns, his pinkie catching in the knife wound and tearing through his cheek and scraping along his gums. He scrambled from the kitchen and managed to make it to his front door which he unlocked with his good hand. He collapsed on the floor of the hallway and began attempting to

remove his shirt. “It’s a Canali,” he moaned. “I bought it myself.”

Dom was allowed to return home five days later with stitches on his face and a promise that further skin grafts would help immensely. He had managed to make a joke with an orderly about punching Dali if he ever saw another melted ear. He walked through the door his first time back home and turned on the radio. Ad for diamond earrings on her special day. He robotically went to the fridge and smelled the hamburger, then broke off an entire fistful for Perry. He watched Perry attack the meat, then fed Saffy as well. And then his eyes naturally trained upwards to the mirror.

In a few weeks or months, he was told, the stitches would become a mere line along his cheek. But, under the gauze, the river of melted flesh that was his ear and high cheekbone and perfect neck, sloping into a perfect shoulder—

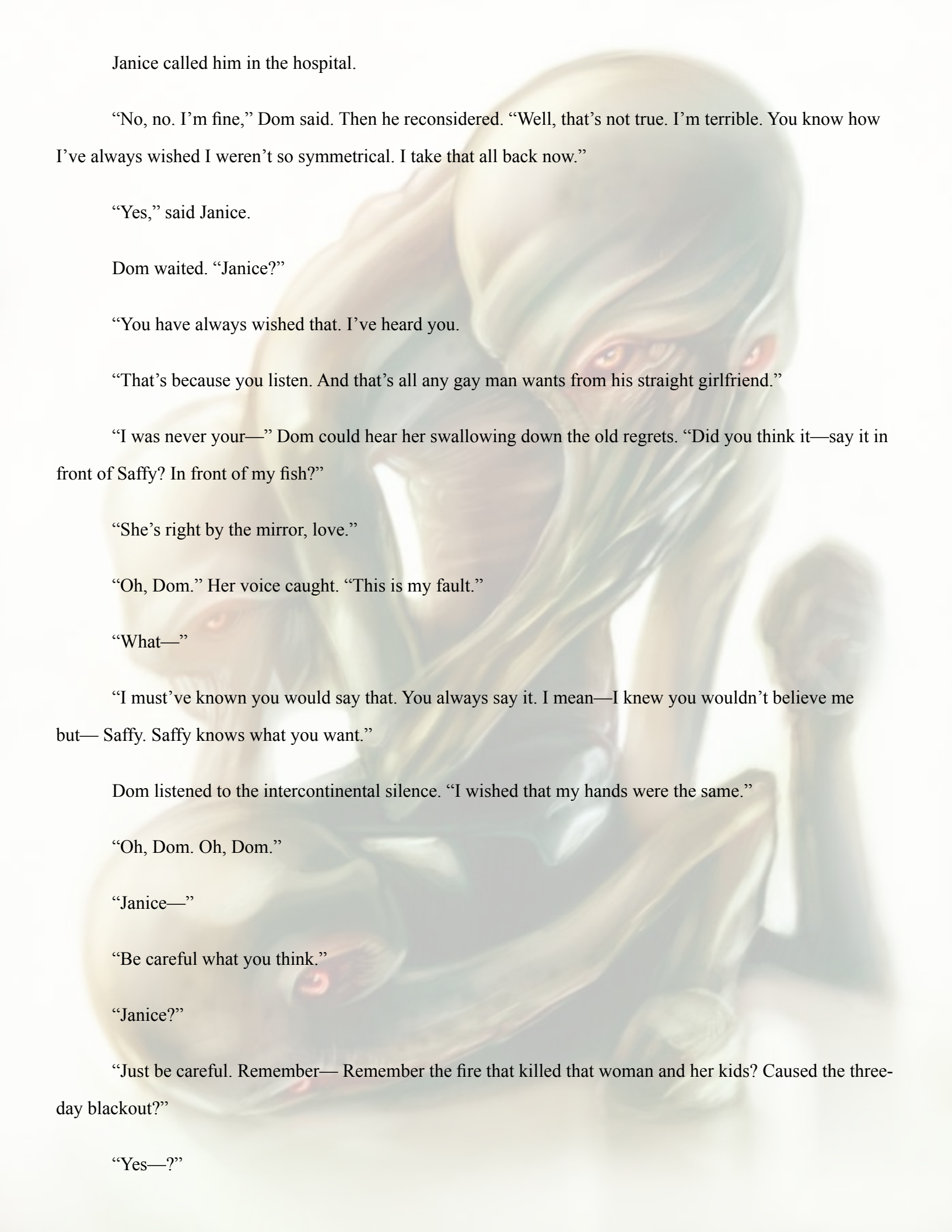
He was hideous. These were not romantic scars. These were not bits of character like the lumps and ridges on a Robert Redford. These were ugly. He glanced back down at Perry. Even his scars seemed like neatly parallel lines in comparison. And Saffy. Her perfect symmetry mocked him now. “I’m uglier outside than inside now.” He sighed. “Still a lie.”

The radio announced a contest for office workers who would email in why “Soft rock leads to hard work” for chances at cash and restaurant gift certificates. Dom raised his hands to his face, crossing his arms so his perfect hand covered his damaged face and his damaged hand covered his perfect face. “At least my hands could still match.”

He sighed again and turned off the radio. This was no time for the Backstreet Boys.

That night, Dom lay in bed, holding a joint with his good hand. He’d already had a prescription for a made-up ailment; now he could put this medicine to legitimate use. He rubbed his toes together and thought about his future and the state of his face, and took another pull. He attempted to blow rings, but his cheek wouldn’t allow him. He touched the stitches which suddenly made him think of railroad tracks and set him off giggling. He tried to remember that old Willie Nelson song about the last train in New Orleans or something but the lyrics got garbled in his giggles until finally he giggled himself to sleep.

Only to wake up with his good hand and the pillow it rested on enlicked by fire.



Janice called him in the hospital.

“No, no. I’m fine,” Dom said. Then he reconsidered. “Well, that’s not true. I’m terrible. You know how I’ve always wished I weren’t so symmetrical. I take that all back now.”

“Yes,” said Janice.

Dom waited. “Janice?”

“You have always wished that. I’ve heard you.

“That’s because you listen. And that’s all any gay man wants from his straight girlfriend.”

“I was never your—” Dom could hear her swallowing down the old regrets. “Did you think it—say it in front of Saffy? In front of my fish?”

“She’s right by the mirror, love.”

“Oh, Dom.” Her voice caught. “This is my fault.”

“What—”

“I must’ve known you would say that. You always say it. I mean—I knew you wouldn’t believe me but— Saffy. Saffy knows what you want.”

Dom listened to the intercontinental silence. “I wished that my hands were the same.”

“Oh, Dom. Oh, Dom.”

“Janice—”

“Be careful what you think.”

“Janice?”

“Just be careful. Remember— Remember the fire that killed that woman and her kids? Caused the three-day blackout?”

“Yes—?”

“I’d wanted a candlelit dinner.”

“But you said—Theo—”

“We met in triage, after that bus crash.”

“I remember—”

“You have to be careful. Just—don’t want anything. Not in front of her.”

“Janice. I already look like a Bacon painting.”

“I know. I don’t hate you, Dom. I never hated you.”

“I never said you did.”

“Will you— Can you forgive me?”

“I’m on codeine, Janice. Who knows.”

Dom entered his apartment in loose sweats, Crocs on his feet, nothing that required fingers to get on or off. He stumbled directly to the fish, tripping over a lone cashmere slipper on his way. He fell to his knees and stared at Saffy who was still staring implacably forward, gills slowly opening and closing, the twilight sun burning evenly, symmetrically, across her brilliantly perfect scales.

“You were right,” said Dom. “It was stupid to ask for. How pathetic: thinking I was too good. I’ve learned my lesson. I have.” He bit his upper lip, pulling his two cheeks different ways. “I don’t know if you can do this, but I don’t think I can be with other men. I think the problem is me. But Perry— He’s never judged me. He’s never cared about my face. He doesn’t now. He just knows I take care of him. No matter who else passed through this apartment, Perry was the same. And Perry won’t leave now. No man’ll ever be Perry. I need Perry. I just—”

Dom turned his head. “This is stupid. I’ve got pills to take.” He used his elbows against the dresser to help him stand and he shambled to the bedroom. He struggled out of his clothes, stood in the shower and pissed down the drain, the last bit rolling down his leg. No matter. He shook a couple pills from the envelope and swallowed them dry. He went to bed, the scorched 1000-count sheets that banker once brought over still in

place, and climbed in. He used his teeth to pull a light blanket over his chest, and drifted right to sleep.

He was awakened by crashing glass. His eyes opened and he stared at a streak of moonlight that arced across the ceiling. A sound of unsteady steps, staggering through sodden carpet, and Dom sat up, focusing on a second beam of moonlight cast upon the mostly closed bedroom door. The steps grew drier, steadier. He noticed their heaviness. A set of pale fingers appeared in the crack, white-blue in the moonlight, and pushed the door open, revealing Perry.

His entire body was hairless. He could not see a scrotum but his phallus reached to the base of his sternum. His chest and shoulders were broad, muscular, tense; his pecs hung over his ill-defined but flat stomach.

“Perry.”

His face was narrow, unnaturally narrow, and his head seemed to taper backwards to a point—almost like an ax head. His eyes were round and too large, but they were focused on Dom and Dom saw in them compassion and understanding.

“Perry.”

He stepped into the room and Dom could see the scarlines running parallel up his side, under his arms and up his neck and onto his wedge face.

“Perry!”

Dom held out his begauzed hands and kicked off the blanket. Perry strode two strong paces to the bed and fell next to Dom’s side, grasping Dom’s waist and pulling him in, his strong chest pushing against Dom’s in a way that made his lungs feel pleasantly tight. Dom’s tight coils of muscles and Perry’s wide highways of strength rubbed against each other and though it pained his own injuries to do so, Dom kissed Perry’s scars along his neck and rubbed his burns against Perry’s meat-buried clavicle.

“Oh, Perry. I knew you would be perfect.” And with his wrist, he rubbed Perry’s flat, triangular face.

Instead of an ear, Perry had a fleshy slit that opened and closed, his breath still slightly fishy. Dom touched it gently with his gauze, then slipped his hand between their bodies and grabbed Perry’s phallus and slid

down its entire length. With his eyes, he continued to watch the slit on the side of Perry's head. As he worked, the slit opened and closed faster and faster, its ocean smell filled the bed and Perry's hands grabbed tighter and more cruelly into Dom's back.

"It's okay," said Dom. "It's okay."

Then it was over and Dom fell onto his back with a satisfied smile. Perry rolled on top of him, supporting his weight on his elbows so he could see Dom; his relaxing member lying upon Dom's belly, his hips still twitching.

"You're welcome," said Dom.

Perry smiled, his round open eyes staring down upon Dom. As the smile grew wider, Perry's lips separated, revealing rows of needle-like teeth.



Dom smiled back and rested a hand on Perry's pectoral. "This is what it's supposed to be like. This is worth it."

Perry's smile continued to grow, leaving the flat front of his face and splitting each side of his wedge head, revealing dozens, hundreds more teeth. And then he lowered his mouth—Dom turned his uninjured half of neck to meet him—and bit. Dom gasped quietly, almost to himself, and felt Perry tear out his flesh and the flood of blood that soaked the sheets under their bodies. Perry bit next from his upper arm and Dom watched the moonlight play upon the ceiling and upon the back of his final, perfect lover.

About the Author

Theric Jepson is the author of a number of dark tales; most recently he edited the off-kilter horror anthology *Monsters & Mormons* from Peculiar Pages. In his spare time he nurses regret.







The Strange and Wonderful World of Joe Whiteford

INTERVIEW BY DANIEL W. GONZALES

DG: So where do you find inspiration for your artwork?

JW: I'm inspired by everything; nature, music, horror films, old comics , Halloween, other artists' work. I'm a big rip off.

DG: I heard you tried to put together a children's book originally with the "Herschell Goes to Heaven" book but it was deemed too dark by publishers. What's the story behind that?

JW: Yeah, I tried to self publish three stories--Herschell, Gordon, and Lewis--through a group in Colorado, but they wouldn't work with me due to the content. And that was only after I'd already been rejected by several publishers that specialized in creepy stories and stuff like that. Herschell can now be seen on YouTube accompanied by a Harley Poe song, some of the Gordon work was used for Harley Poe's Wretched. Filthy. Ugly. album, and I gave the Lewis art to the band Mercury Radio Theater, hoping they'd use it for a new ep. I know they used it for their shows for awhile, but I'm not sure if they plan to release it with music on an album. I don't know if it will ever be released, other than on my blog.

DG: Do you see your stuff being like cautionary tales for demented children? Kind of like Edward Gorey or Tim Burton's "Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy" book?

JW: Just Herschell. I wouldn't mind illustrating books for children for some kind

of a living, because my style looks more like something you'd see in a kids book; however, I'd much rather write these stories for adults. I'd rather put in more sex and violence, but still use a style that one would expect from something you'd see in a children's book. Though I'm in the process of drawing an ABC book for a younger demented audience, my stuff is mostly intended for adults like myself.

DG: What is your fascination with 1950's monsters? I see you did a series on them.

JW: I was reading a book that had a lot of old photos of 1950's monster movies and at the same time a friend had given me some watercolor paints. I'd never used watercolors before so I thought I'd give it a shot drawing these monsters in the book. I became obsessed and tracked down nearly every monster movie featured in the book and came up with the idea to get a bunch of artists together to draw their favorite monsters as well. I had thought more artists that love monster movies would want to get involved with the project and we could collectively self publish a book, but the submissions that came in were either by monster movie fans who weren't very good artists, or great artists that had no knowledge of monster movies. Everybody kept submitting illustrations of Dracula or Freddy. Obviously it didn't work out, but recently I've been talking to a comic book artist from Washington who is interested in getting the project moving again. I would like for it to work out. I eventually released some of those original monster illustrations through a collection of buttons, but only a handful of cool people care.

DG: You are also in the band, "Harley Poe". Which means more to you, the art or performing? What do you get the greater high off of?

JW: I get a pretty big high from playing shows, but I feel much more accomplished when I sell my art. The band plays a show or two a month, but I think I'd rather spend that time selling my art at a comic or horror convention. I'd like to play more shows and have more time to sculpt and illustrate, but that's less time with my family. It's hard to balance everything. In the future, I want to release a series of Harley Poe 7 inches with original art for the covers. Sell them as art prints that come with records. The emphasis would be on the limited edition art print, but the record would be an incentive for the Harley Poe fans.

DG: Your artwork is amazing and inspirational. You see a certain beauty in the grotesque aspects of life. I described your work as Maurice Sendak on crack to a friend. What would you describe your work as?

JW: Thanks so much. That means a lot. I absolutely love the illustrations in Sendak's book, but I really didn't care for the movie...at all. I don't know how I'd describe my own work. It's just a conglomeration of sad imitations hacked from the masterpieces of those before me who've done it and do it much better.

DG: Who are your favorite artists?

JW: I love Richard Sala's comics. His drawing style is one of a kind, but his stories are so intricate. Right now I'm also into Charles Addams. Been reading his autobiography and going through his cartoons lately. Beautiful.

*Joe Whiteford
2010*



LOUIE

art BY JOE WHITEFORD











Candy-Coated Carlton Mellick III

Knob Tyler thinks he's the strongest, toughest, most badass motherfucker on Mill Avenue. Unfortunately, Knob has a lollipop for a head. This makes him not quite as badass as he thinks he is.

While he's strutting down the street with his white muscle shirt tossed over his sweat-drenched shoulder, Knob likes to flex his pectorals at the ladies. Whenever he says *ladies*, he pronounces it *laydaaays*. But for some reason the laydaaays are never impressed by the size of his pecs. They are too creeped out by his weird lollipop head to notice anything special about his muscles.

Knob's lollipop head is the size of a bowling ball and light orange in color. The flavor of the lollipop is Tropical Sensation, which is a mixture of pineapple, mango, and star fruit. His tiny candy eyes, nose, and mouth are clustered together in the center of his large round face. His eyebrows are always curled downward to show how fucking serious he is about shit.

Oftentimes, when the sun is shining hard on Mill Avenue, Knob's lollipop head will begin to sweat, filling the air with tropical sweetness. This smell attracts flies that stick to the side of his face and squirm around his ear holes. Knob tries to wipe them away, but for every fly he frees, three more take its place. This isn't good for picking up the laydaaays.

What also isn't good for picking them up is the gang of bearded truckers that always follow him around, trying to lick his head. It isn't easy to pick up laydaaays when there are bearded truckers licking your head.

But you have to understand, truckers really love Tropical Sensation-flavored lollipops. They are addicted to them. There's something about driving a big rig down the interstate, listening to "Kansas City Lights," and sucking a Tropical Sensation lollipop down to the gooey paper stick that really makes them feel at peace with the universe. Now that Tropical Sensation is a discontinued flavor, these truckers can't do this anymore. The only way they can satisfy their tropical fix is to go down to Mill Avenue, sneak up behind Knob Tyler, and lick the back of his bald candy head.

But even this is becoming a limited resource for their Tropical Sensation needs. There is only so much licking a lollipop can take. Knob has not realized any difference while flexing in front of his mirror each morning. He is too busy watching the size of his muscles increase to notice the size of his head decreasing.

The truckers, on the other hand, have noticed the difference in size as of late. And the thought that his head might shrink away to nothing has sent a wave of panic through the trucker community.

Knob is a connoisseur of fine cheeses. Today, he is at a cheese tasting at the fancy cheesery on Mill Avenue. He holds a tiny chunk of Raclette Poivre on a toothpick, nibbling the edges with his sticky orange lips.

The shop is filled with cheese enthusiasts, gathering together for the weekly tasting. Knob struts by goateed men in gray business-casual attire, sizes them up, then moves on. Knob knows that he's the buffest cheese taster in the room. He thinks this will give him an advantage over the competition when picking up the laydaaays.

While cruising the cheesery, Knob realizes that most of the women in the room are with other guys. But this doesn't stop him from flirting at a distance. He goes to a turtleneck-sweatered woman speaking to a shrimpy, goateed man. Standing behind the man's shoulder, Knob flexes a single pectoral muscle at the woman as if it is asking her a question.

The woman knows Knob is there but she does not make eye contact, so he raises his pec even higher, then higher. The woman does not acknowledge him. He blames it on the cheesery's absurd no-shirt, no-service policy. He knows she would be much more impressed if he didn't have his shirt on.

Knob gets himself a glass of Nebbiolo and samples a Piave Vecchio. He smiles and bobs his head at the taste.

"This is a good cheese," he says to a woman breast-feeding a baby in a sling. Then he looks down at her bare breast and raises a candy eyebrow. The woman covers the baby's head and steps away.

Knob shrugs and moves on.

After five more failed attempts, Knob decides to focus on the cheeses. He has an extra-aged Mimolette, which he learns goes very well with a Zinfandel or Syrah. He then tries the Emmenthaler, which has hints of flowers, raisins, and wood fires.

"You *have* to try the Banon," says a voice behind his shoulder.

Knob turns around to see a woman with short blond hair, square glasses, and a baseball cap. He recognizes her from previous tastings. She's one of the few regulars he hasn't had the chance to hit on yet, because she's always watching old Flash Gordon serials on her iPod and never seems aware of her surroundings. He's checked her out, of course, and thought she was quite the hottie but a little too flat-chested for his taste.

"It was aged in a chestnut leaf," she says, biting into a piece of cheese on a water cracker.

Knob looks to see if there is anybody standing behind him, just in case she might be talking to somebody else. There isn't. He raises one shoulder and slowly flexes a pectoral muscle.

"Try it," she says, pointing her cheese in his face.

Knob opens his mouth. She drops in the cheese. He chews and swallows.

"It's good," he says, his throat crusty with powdered cracker.

"I see you in here all the time," she says. "Are you really into gourmet cheeses?"

He nods his lollipop head.

"I live for cheese," she says.

"Yeah, me too," he says, his pectoral muscles dancing for her.

They turn back to the cheese table. Knob checks out the girl while she examines the cheeses. Her purple skirt wiggles when she spreads a Brie de Nangis on a slice of crusty bread. He leans in to get a better look at her front, when something wets the back of his head.

Knob turns around. There is a beefy, tattooed, potbellied trucker standing behind him holding up a piece of Port-Salut on a toothpick. Knob glares at him.

“What?” says the trucker, licking his lips through a wiry gray beard.

Knob turns back to the girl. Of all the times to have a trucker licking his head, this one is the worst.

“I’m Alisa,” says the girl, grabbing his hand to shake.

With his free hand, Knob feels the wet spot on his head and pulls away a few curly gray hairs.

“Knobert Tyler,” he says, and bows slightly at her.

While leaning down for the bow, Knob feels two more licks on his head. He turns around. There are two more truckers behind him. These two are fatter and hairier than the first. They smile at him, holding glasses of wine and chewing on cheeses.

Knob sizes up the truckers. The truckers size up Knob. Before they get a chance to confront him, Knob turns to Alisa. He isn’t sure if Alisa witnessed the truckers licking him, so he decides to play it off as if nothing happened.

“Try this Stilton,” Alisa says, holding a bite of cheese to his face.

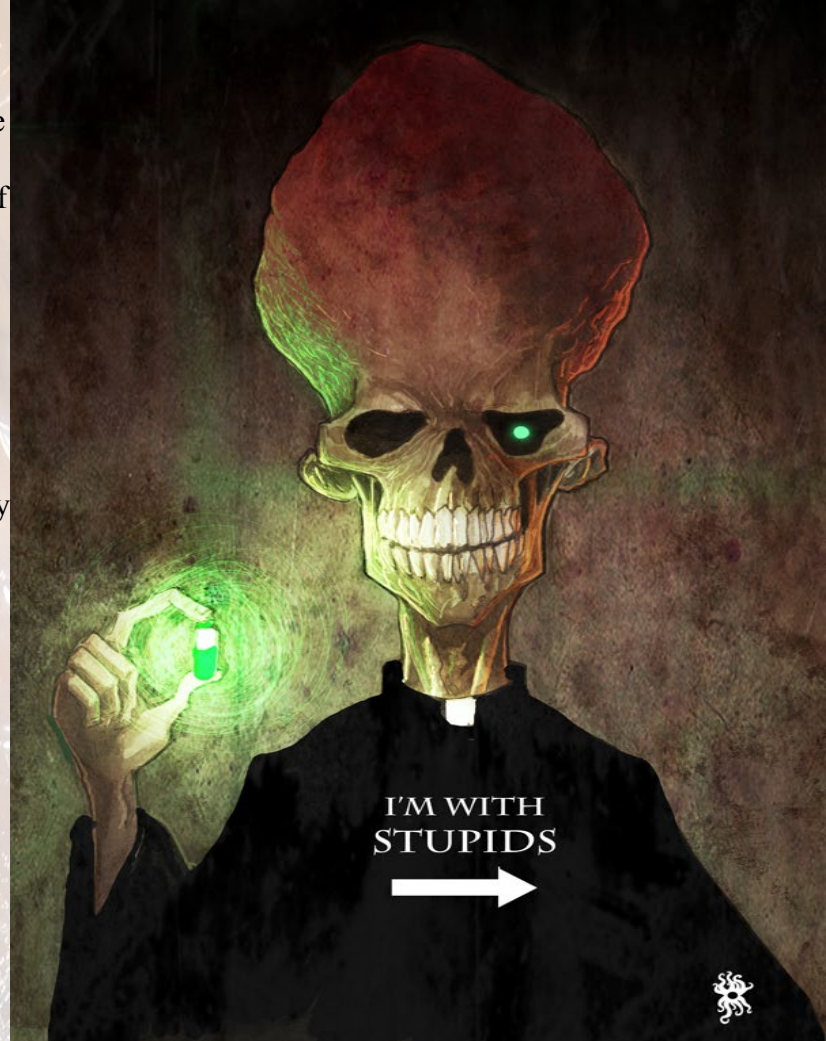
Knob opens his mouth. As he bites into the cheese, he feels wide tongues lapping at the back of his head. They squirm against his candy scalp like fat greasy snakes.

While the truckers lick his head, Knob pretends that nothing is wrong. This is his first big chance at scoring in a long time and he doesn’t want to mess it up. He chews the cheese and nods at the flavor, as the bearded truckers slobber all over him.

“It tastes like ginger,” he says, cringing at the curly hairs that caress the back of his neck.

“Yeah, it has mango and ginger,” Alisa says.

Knob doesn’t know why Alisa hasn’t noticed the truckers yet. He just plays it off cool, hoping that his dancing pectoral muscles have hypnotized her. Many of the other cheese tasters have noticed the licking truckers, however, and are now politely inching away from him. Knob flexes his muscles as tightly as he can, to prove to them that he is not gay no matter how many truckers are licking his head.



“They had a five-year Gouda here last time that was really good,” he says, as a warm wetness coils into his right ear hole.

Knob casually breaks away from the worming tongues and switches to the other side of Alisa.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, blinking her blue eyes. “That was terrific. I bought some to take home.”

Knob feels another lick, and he turns around. The number of customers in the cheesery has suddenly doubled. Over half of them are overweight truckers who have sneaked in under Knob’s radar like stealthy obese ninjas. They are spread throughout the shop, mingling with the other cheese enthusiasts. Knob can see them ogling him from across the room, winking at him between sips of chardonnay.

“They always have the most interesting cheeses at this place,” Alisa says.

When she turns her back to grab some more wine, a dozen truckers charge the back of Knob’s head. They hold him by the shoulders and take turns slurping on him as hard as they can. Knob tenses up like he just hopped into a freezing-cold shower. He retains a manly posture while being gang-licked by the truckers, so that none of the laydaaays watching think he’s gay.

The truckers stop licking once Alisa returns to Knob. She notices that his orange head is soaked and his muscles are tensed.

“What happened to you?” she asks.

Knob slicks his hand across his lollipop head, collecting a mass of orange slime. Alisa examines his head.

“What’s this?” she says, wiping her finger across a tender spot on the back of his lollipop.

Knob feels the area her finger wiped. There is a lump.

“It looks like... bone,” she says.

Knob can feel it. His lollipop head has been licked down so far that it has finally degraded to the bone.

“It’s your skull,” she says. “Your skull is showing.”

The truckers notice the white lump sticking out of the orange candy like the Tootsie of a half-eaten Tootsie Roll Pop. They bow their heads in shame. Knob fingers his head frantically, wondering what has happened to the rest of it. The other cheese enthusiasts wince at the sight of him.

“We need to get you to the hospital,” Alisa says.

She sits him down in a chair. As his head lowers to her level, she gets a whiff of pineapple, mango, and star fruit.

“That smell...” She suddenly forgets about the hospital and becomes lost in the fragrance.

Then she licks his head.

“Is this...” She licks again. “Tropical Sensation?”

Before Knob has a chance to ask her what she’s doing, Alisa takes a few more licks and then bites down on his skull, cracking open the bone.

“I’m sorry,” she says, wiping orange sauce from her lips. “I’ve never been able to stop myself from biting.”

Everyone in the shop freezes. Yuppies and truckers alike have their eyes locked on Knob and Alisa, their mouths drooped in horror at Knob’s cracked-open lollipop head. Unlike his head, Knob’s brain looks the same as any normal person’s brain, only it sweats a deep mahogany fluid that resembles a tawny port.

The taste of this brain fluid mingles with the tropical flavor in Alisa’s mouth. Her eyes become distant as she rolls the mahogany liquid across her palate. Then she swallows slowly and smiles.

Knob’s pecs cower toward his armpits. He holds back the pain as best as he can so that nobody thinks he’s a wimp. But the crowd is no longer paying attention to Knob. Their eyes are glued on Alisa.

“Wow,” she says. “It tastes even better on the inside.”

Alisa takes another lick of Knob’s brain, slower, really trying to get a good taste. She savors the fluid in her mouth, exploring the complexities.

She explains what she is tasting to the crowd: “It’s nutty... and sweet. I can taste hints of vanilla... raisins... tobacco... strawberry...”

Then she stabs a piece of cheese with a toothpick and puts it in her mouth. Her eyes roll in euphoric bliss. “And it’s just *amazing* with this Stilton.”

Knob gawks at the crazy woman, wondering what is wrong with her, but the rest of cheese tasters now seem more curious than shocked.

“You *have* to try it,” she says to the cheese tasters.

The manager of the shop nudges his way through the crowd to them. Alisa arches the back of Knob’s head toward the manager’s nicely manicured goatee. The man dabs his tongue quickly against Knob’s brain, catching only a drop of the fluid. Alisa pops a piece of Stilton through his lips and the man bites down. His eyes light up.

“Oh, my...” says the manager. “Yes, yes.” He waves his wife over to Knob’s head. “It is fantastic!”

After the man’s wife gives it a try, she says, “This is divine!”

Knob becomes the hit of the cheesery and a hit with the laydaaays. Everyone wants to take a lick at Knob’s brain, especially the truckers. They start a line that winds through the entire shop and stretches out the door.

There is not a woman in the room who doesn’t want to lick him. The turtleneck-sweatered yuppie girl who had ignored him earlier slips her phone number into his pocket when her goateed boyfriend isn’t looking. Knob just nods his head and pumps his pectoral muscles to the rhythm of “Kansas City Lights.” The truckers raise their wineglasses in approval.

Alisa wraps her arm around Knob's neck and kisses his hard candy cheek.

"Why don't we grab a bottle of wine and go back to my place?" she says.

Knob gives her a wink. Then she cuts through the crowd to the wine section to find something special for them.

"Score," he says to himself, as the truckers and the cheese enthusiasts break off more of his candy coating to get to the tastier flavor within.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CARLTON MELLICK III is one of the leading authors in the bizarro fiction movement. His influences range from offbeat children's book authors such as Dr. Suess and Roald Dahl to Japanese cult directors such as Takashi Miike and Shinya Tsukamoto to trashy B-movies such as those from Troma and John Waters.

He lives in Portland, OR, where the breweries, bookstores, and strip clubs are the best in the country.



Bibliomancy

D. Harlan Wilson

A fat librarian slams into the periphery. She has married the role: frizzled gray hair, coke bottle spectacles, judgmental yellow grin, acid-washed rawhide, long faux-pearl necklace, plus-sized dress that looks more like a window curtain in an Old Folks parlor, all complimented by the razorsharp ethics of a thoroughbred prude . . .

We get in a fight. I take a swing and scrape my knuckles against a sidebar. She leans in with a powerful forearm and clips me on the jaw, momentarily paralyzing me. The elbow is calloused and rough, like crumpled sandpaper.

The blow draws blood.

Towering shelves of leatherbound survival manuals call the atmosphere into question. Addicted to clichés, I remove a volume and open it to the copyright page. I read the publishing information, voraciously, waiting for jackdaws to descend on a traumatic hotbed. They don't come. The librarian releases a second volley. This time I'm ready and I duck out of the way and lunge at her with a two-handed mallet. I find purchase between the shoulderblades. She hammers the asphalt, cracking it, and her limbs snap backwards into her core.

The reel unspools in the wake a fever dream. The monotony of celluloid, the tyranny of evil birds.

. . . A skaterat perceives herself as an intellectual and finagles her way into the classroom. Professor Superzero indulges her until she allows him to fuck her, then delicately explains that her wires are crisscrossed, her dogmatisms unoccupied; she must storm the video fairgrounds and never go back to Attica. The professor adds, "I am not intimidated by your skaterat morality. Go away. Sprinkle your klonopin dust in somebody else's nasal cavity. Your teeth are yellow and your bones show through the rind. Disavowal is the price of life, but I

assure you, my subjectivity conquered the objective world long ago, and I apologize in advance when I say that your preternatural delusions are your own affair. Skate or die.”

We arrive at the entrance to prediscursive Certainty. This matrix contravenes the impossible. Brass instruments die a quick death and a towering stone door yawns open. I ready myself for an apocalypse with the same vigilance and fortitude that I would apply to a hangnail. Whatever happens—the destruction of everything, an epidermal imperfection, anything in between—I will deflect the atrocity and set fire to all of the gardens.

Beyond the perimeter, a man sits in a corner and speaks into the magneto generator of a wooden hand-cranked telephone affixed to the wall. He repeats this dictum with the relativity of a metronome: “The unconscious is structured like a language.” He does not have eyelids and I may or may not be mistaking myself as the target of his gaze.

Idle, he shows me his head and stares blankly at the artifact.

I enter the long gable and listen to a twenty-minute paper on autofeminism. The woman who reads the paper may be the librarian; for the moment, at least, her flesh defies her identity. Every seat is occupied and I have to stand in the aisle. Afterwards we drink stale coffee and eat dry scones and talk about the aisle (how it veers to the left, how it isn’t like other aisles, how it wouldn’t exist in the absence of chair assemblages, etc.). A professor of business ethics approaches me. “Welcome to Public Health Terrorism 305,” he announces, as if occupying a lectern. I can smell the aftershock on his breath. “As you know, there are significant student fees for this course. Fees upwards of 500 dollars, I say. You need to pay for your guns. You must recognize the dynamism of my unease. Also, remember the golden rule: always go to bed on an empty stomach and never eat carbohydrates after six o’clock.”

“I am not a student,” I explain. “And I have not tasted a carbohydrate in over thirty years.” I lift my shirt and expose the Lacanian Real . . .

I walk backwards into my dorm room. The timelapse accelerates and decelerates, ebbs and flows. I have two roommates. One of them is a student. I don’t detect his presence at first, and when I do, anxiety and dread infect me like a worldview. He sits on a wooden stool and holds a shaved head in his hands. “What did I do?” I ask in backwardspeak. “I know I did something. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here.” He falls asleep and slips off of the stool. He might have been sleeping in the first place. I wake him and he gets up and directs me towards

the cafeteria at a harrowing pace.

A writer pries his way into the *mise en scène*. Calmly a gunman steps into view and shoots him in the head. Broken polaroids splatter against the wall. “No writers allowed,” says the gunman.

In the cafeteria, I make small talk with the cook, then order 10 mg of Flexeril, 10 mg of Xanax, half an ounce of marijuana, a vial of crack and an eight-ball of cocaine. I swallow all of the pills, smoke all of the pot, mainline the rock and snort the blow. Sensing death, I seek out the nearest bathtub and turn on the water. Celluloid pours out of the faucet like bad honey. I submerge myself and push all of the air from my lungs. I lay in the tub with eyes open for an undisclosed length of time . . . then get out and dry off, feeling refreshed despite mild agonal respirations, clogged arteries and cardiac arrhythmia.

“The drugs have worn off,” I explain to a chambermaid, wooing her. She turns from the window with a quick jerk and exposes herself as the librarian. The rolling flags of her cheeks frame an evil grin.

She says something that I instantly repress and blot out.

I remind her: “I do drugs because of the people I meet. Especially the ones I want to meet. Nobody I have ever liked on paper has appealed to me as a human being. In fact, the more I like them on paper, the more I despise them *dans la chair*.”

“*En chair*,” she explains.

The synapses hit their respective bullseyes and she realizes I am nothing short of an electromagnetic earthfucker. She tries to jump off of the balcony, but I catch her by the apron, and I punch her in the kidneys until I get tired and can’t lift my arms. Splayed out on the carpet like a great, mangled crab, the librarian gasps for air, quivering in weird places, as I stride onto the balcony and admire the view. Beneath me, the colorful streets of Nice fall into a nude beach populated by old, hairy Europeans in thongs.

The afternoon threads into midnight and I can’t see anything or anybody.

In an attempt to find the sun, I buy a first class ticket to Miami and fall asleep in the lobby of the hotel. A bellhop negotiates bags that I have filled with quicksand in an attempt to dissuade thieves and baggage handlers. Eternity stretches across the coastline. The commander-in-chief’s disabled brother is a cook in the hotel. Time after time he exits the kitchen, making faces and noises, and the commander-in-chief must escort him into a back room, by the elbow, firmly, with a concerned smile.

I awake.

Roosting on tall chairs, logicians in flower-patterned cruisewear have surrounded me.

The commander-in-chief stands next to us. He asks what we think about the state of pop music and the direction it should go in. Plainly intimidated, the logicians mete out articulate, quickfire responses in need of revision and more thoughtfulness. I don't know the answer to his question and slip aside.

The next time I wake it is to the music of apocalyptic alarm trumpets. "Forty seconds ago, the earth moved," says a voice in German. And then, in English: "*Wir werden total gebumst.*" We run out of the hotel and try to get to higher ground, scrambling up escarpments and buttes and *ffälls*, but Sweden has already conquered the sky; the resultant tsunami defies normative conceptions of acromegaly and I acknowledge the futility of escape. I stand in the grass and wait to drown.

Before birth, I worried about this moment.

Anxiestentialism.

Anxiety precedes existence.

Essence as a choleric adenoid.

The waters roll over me and drag me across the tundra and I tumble into a distant oubliette blinking on the rim of Creation . . . The door is ajar. Quietly I escape and kill the first person I encounter on the street, a good Samaritan who offers me a ride. Staring at the corpse, I perceive the Samaritan as the librarian.

Three plainclothes officers collect me and drag me back to jail, as if expecting my insurrection, but the warden tells them to let me go. "She's dead," he explains, "and this man has already been punished." We smoke a cigar and talk about Africa and then I release myself of my own veiled recognizance.

Finally I enter the library. I begin to unpack it. Crates and torn papers cover the floor. Dust surges through the crooked stacks, pooling in open knots. The staff doesn't know what to do. I put the communications director in a headlock and knock him out with a chloroform-soaked cravat that I press against his nose. The walls of the control room shift and slide and lock in and out of place like a puzzlebox. I use the intercom system to remind everybody: "Such a man is speaking to you. On closer scrutiny he proves to be speaking only about

himself.” Occasionally I pin down a worker by the arms and hammer my fists against his face and chest until he stops calling me sir. This manner of conduct seeps into the ecosphere. It prompts unspeakable flowers to wilt on the vine while moratoria rise from the wounds of open, informative graves . . .

About the Author

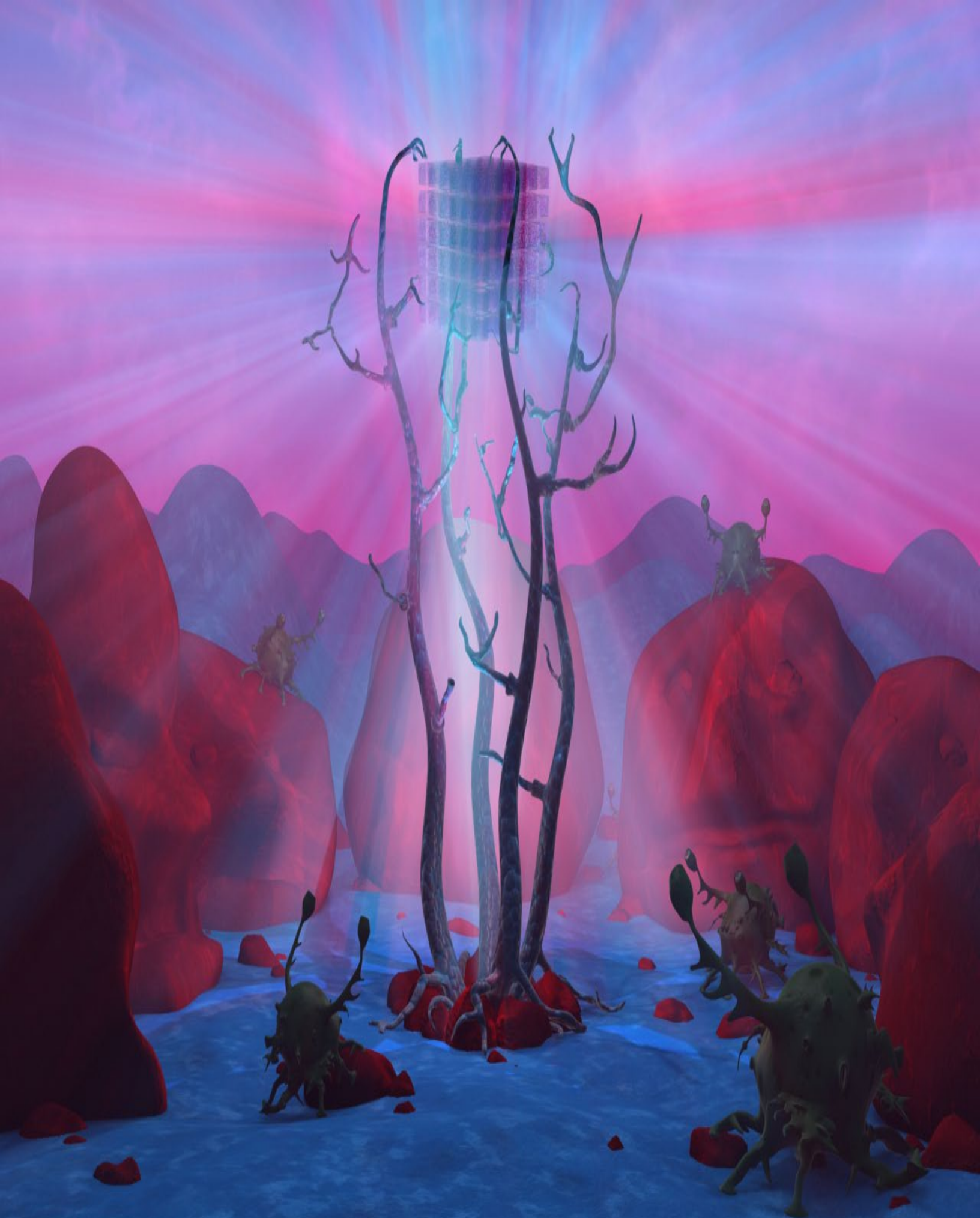
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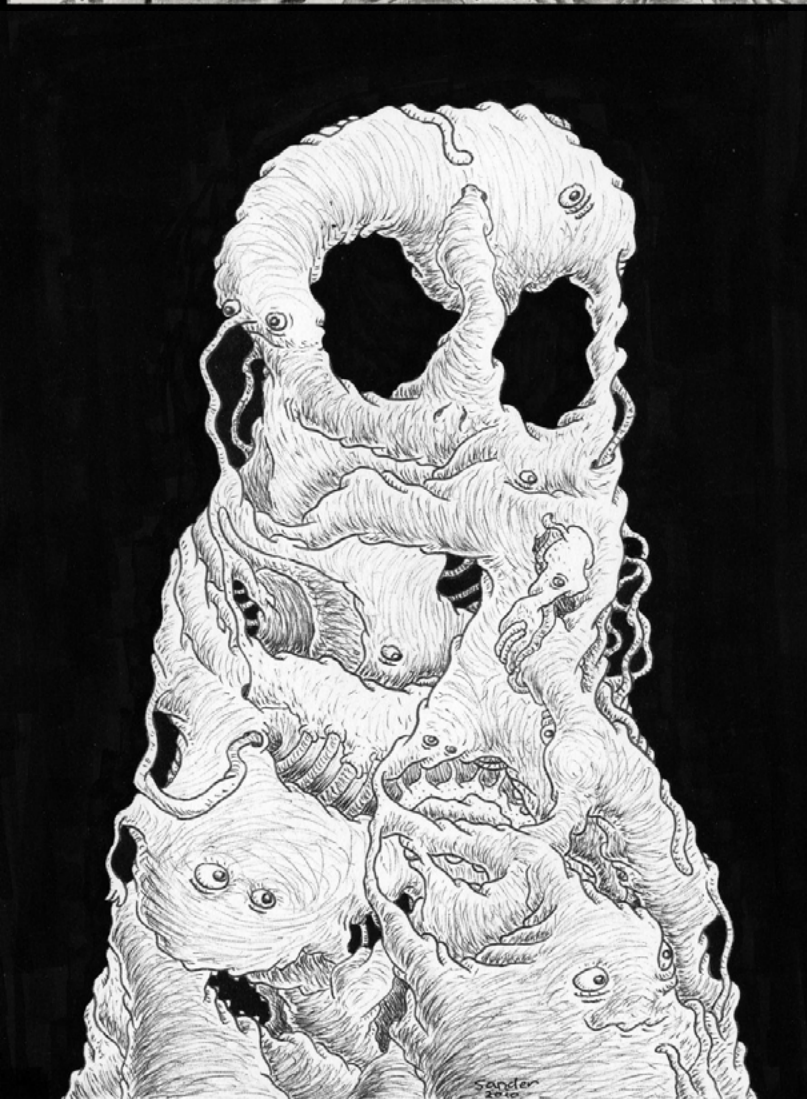
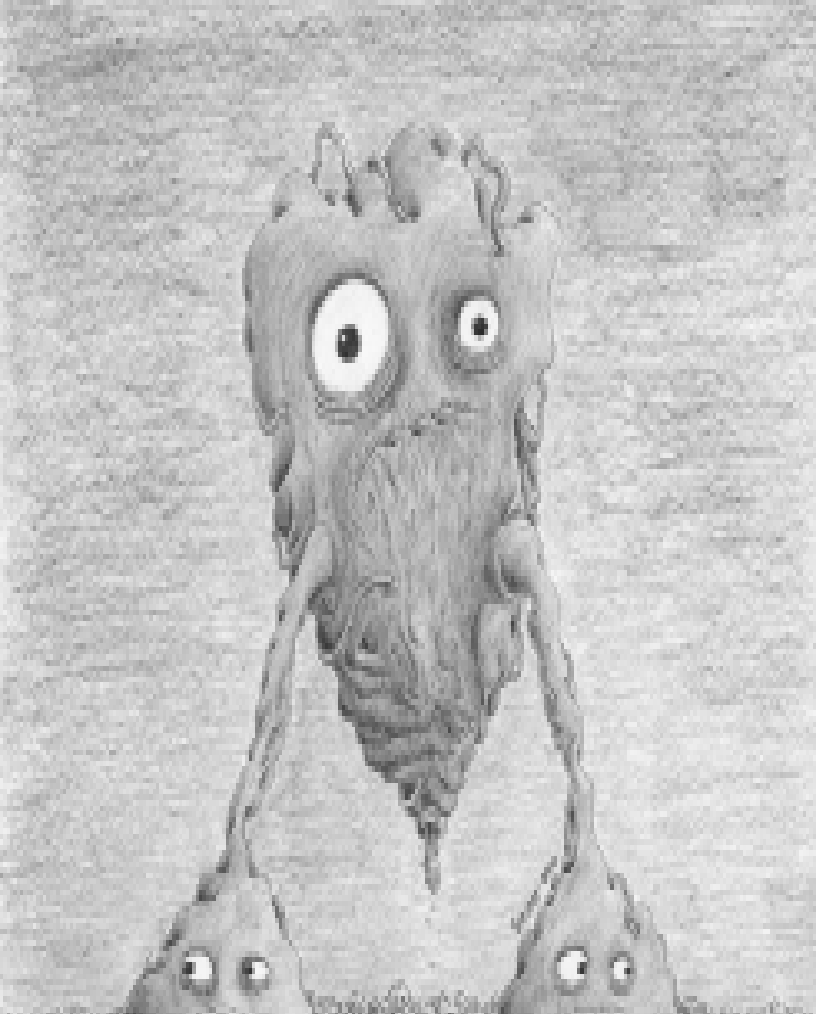
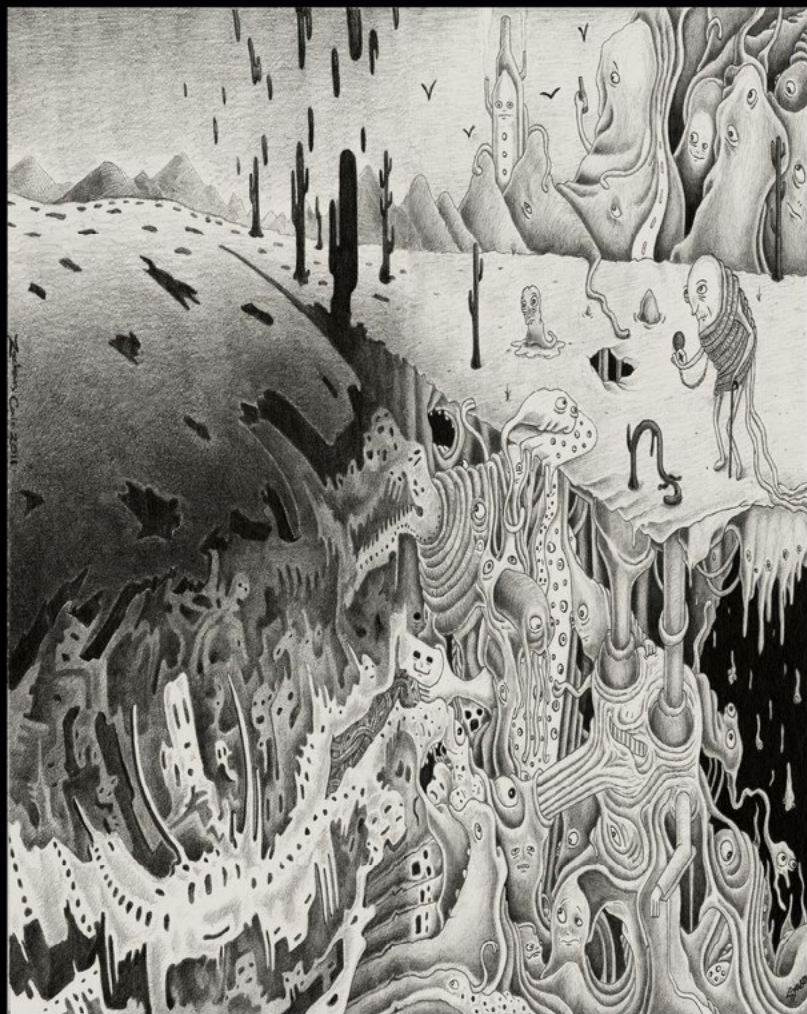
A detailed anatomical illustration of a human skeleton playing a violin. The skeleton is depicted in a dynamic pose, with its arms raised and the violin held across its chest. The background features a large, stylized red heart with a black outline, set against a backdrop of various anatomical structures, including muscles, bones, and internal organs. The overall style is a blend of scientific accuracy and artistic expression, with a focus on the human form and its internal systems.

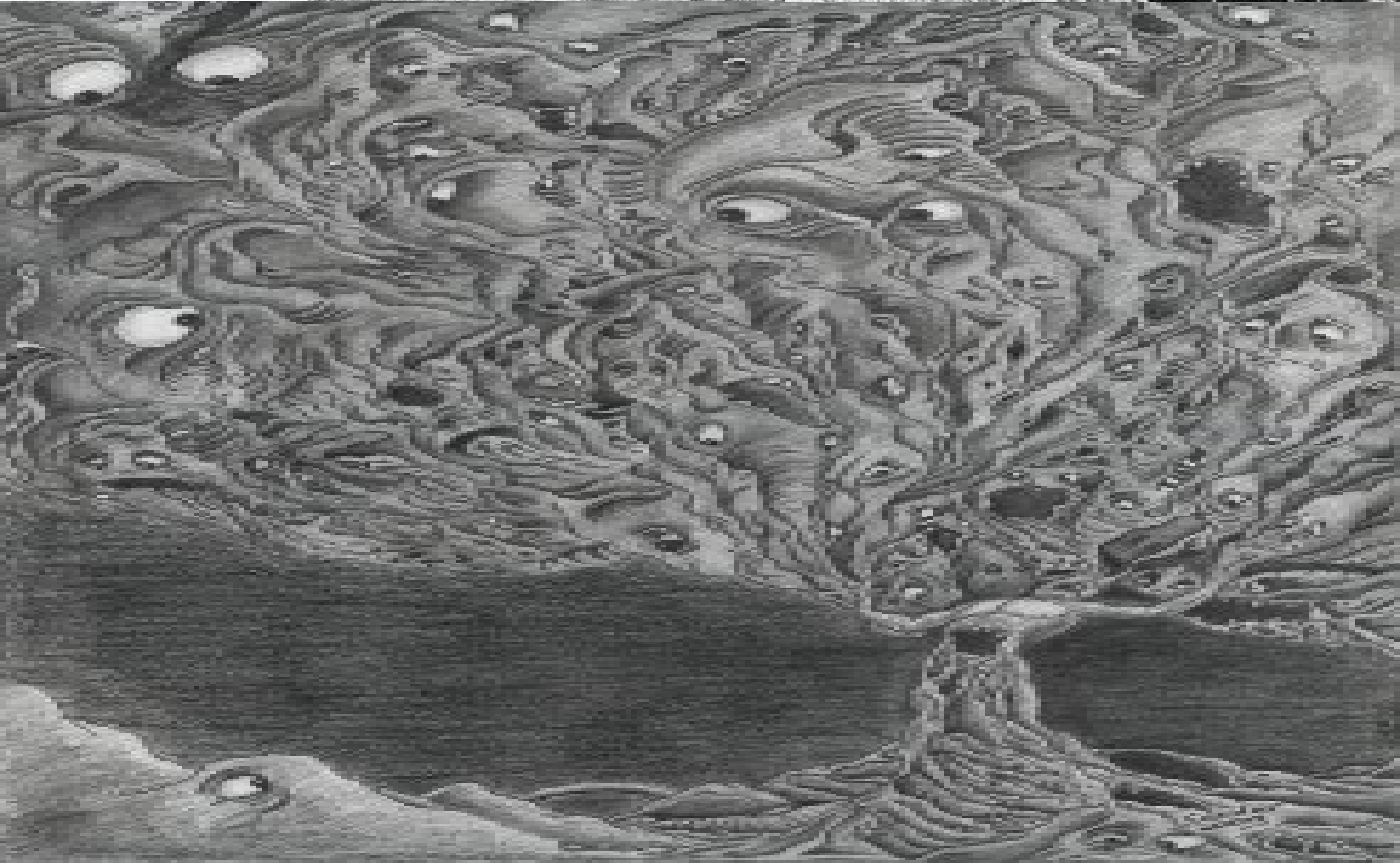
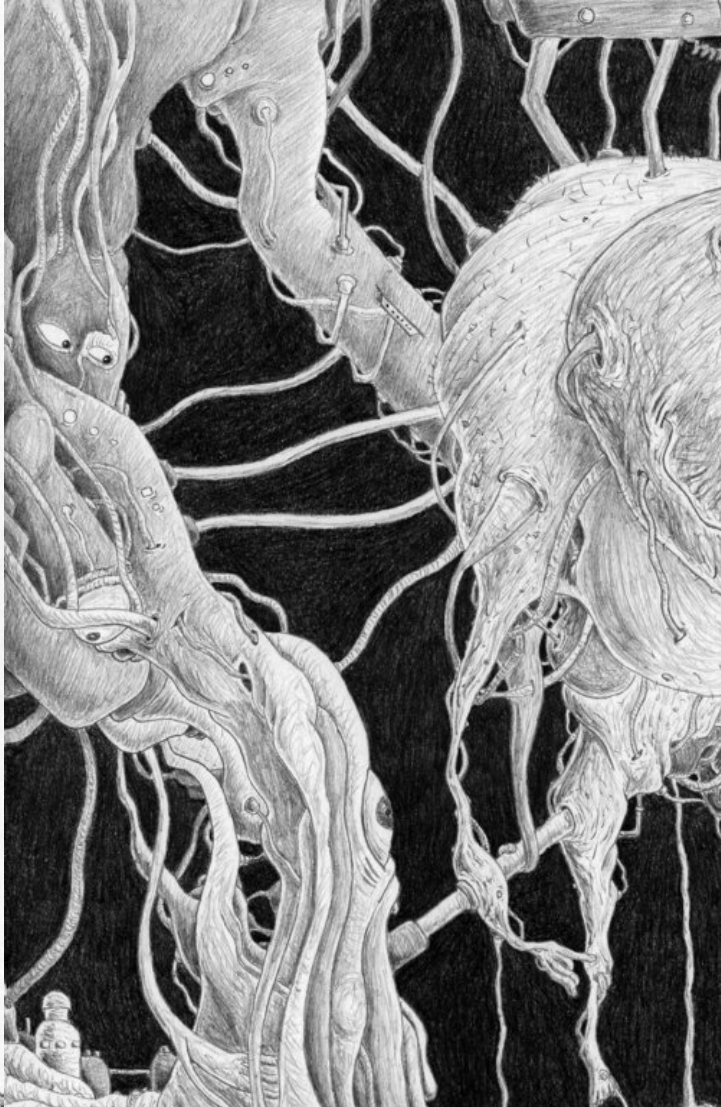
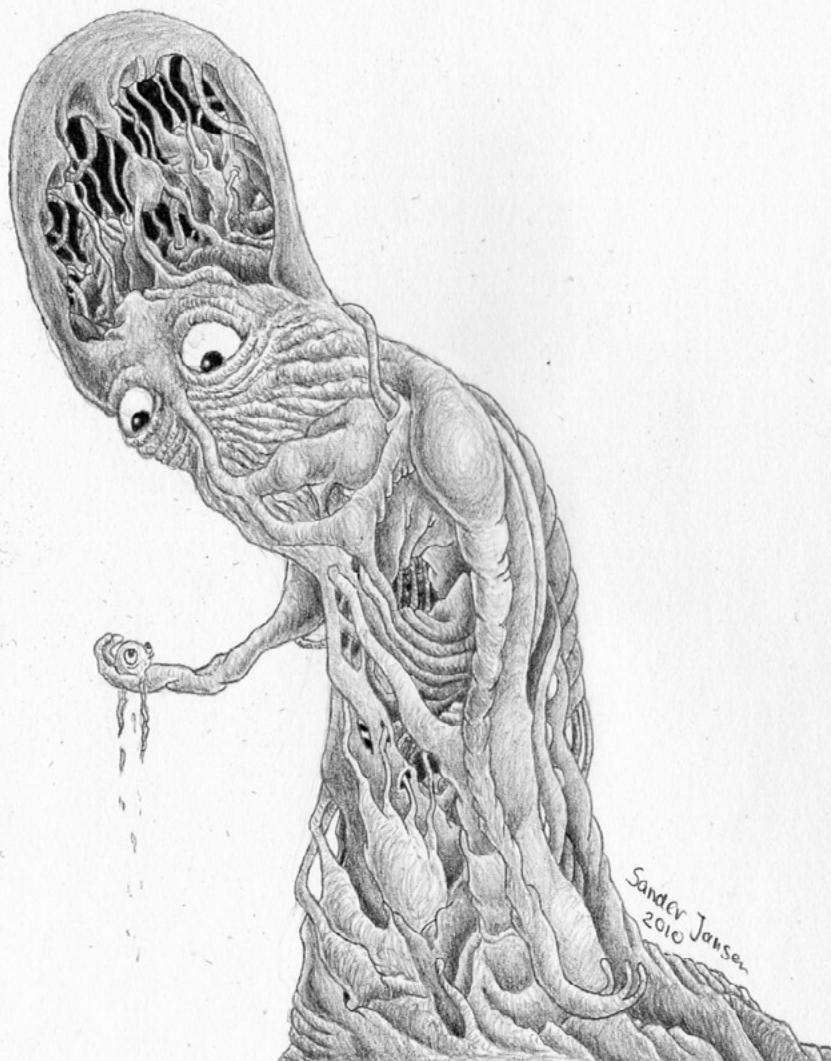
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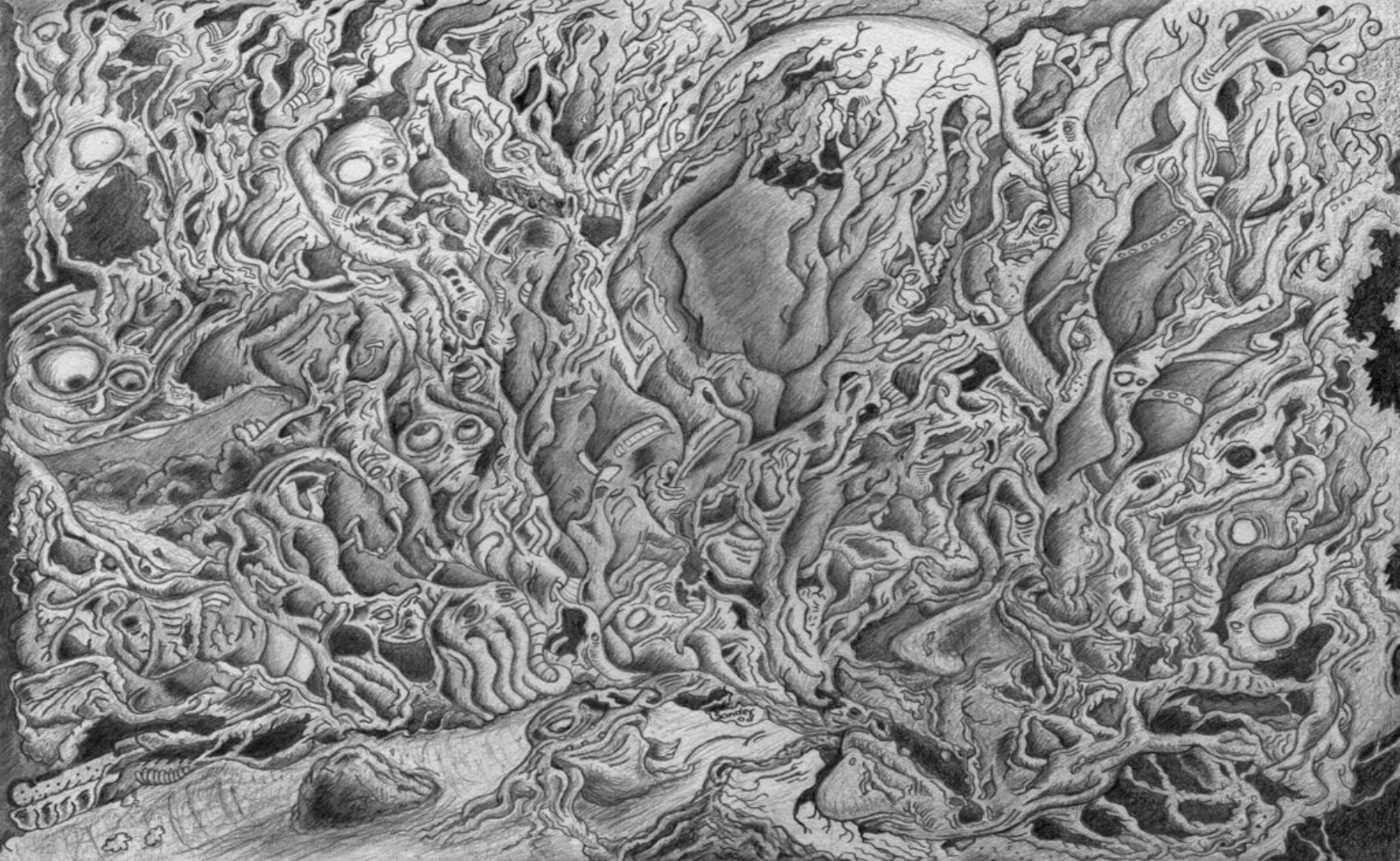
SANDER JANSEN











Lilacs

Ryan Swofford

Let me start by saying rosemary bushes and lilacs don't even smell that great.

My mother and I had just moved to our house in Redmond. For the first few months, while I got acquainted with this guy named Ken and eventually weed, my mother spent her time painting and decorating the house—she just wanted it to look nice. Or at least better than it did when we bought it. We bought it from an old guy who wanted to die in a nursing home (for whatever reason—maybe he couldn't wipe his own ass and he realized it), and he'd never done any decorating. He was a very plain man, and whatever austerity he could lend to the house, he lent it. To be honest, it was even more boring being outside.

That's why my mom, she told me get in the car. We're going shopping.

My mom never calls shopping "shopping." She calls stealing shopping. It's her way of justifying her untamable kleptomania, no matter what she wants to call it. And she made me steal, too. I stole pots and pans and books and movies and CDs and office supplies and little knick-knacks she thought were cute. I always got away with it—I mean: I wasn't stupid. You can always get away with shoplifting as long as you don't do anything stupid. Don't call attention to yourself. Look a little interested in what you're looking at, but don't fixate yourself on it. Just look calm. Cool. Collected. Like you're just looking at stuff to bring home for your every-day kind of life. All that. Don't be shaky or sweaty or looking over your shoulder. Don't wear an oversized coat. Wear a medium-length summer dress with flowers on them with sunglasses and flip-flops if it's summer—and carry a little handbag, if you can. And if it's winter, or if it's cold or wet, just throw on a hoodie and some sweats. Anything baggy but practical. Nothing that will make people look at you funny. And stay away from jewelry unless it's on the racks in bunches—then take as much as you want—with moderation, of course. This is all stuff my mom told me about shoplifting.

Because, you know, she knew what she was doing.

Big time. Once, she managed to walk away from a bookstore with twenty self-improvement books stuffed in her pants. Another time, she put on a hat she liked and walked right out've the department store with the price-tag on it and everything. This woman was a thieving guru. A fucking ninja at 40 years old. With a yeast infection and bad smoker teeth. In Sovetsk, I thought, when you're little they must teach you how to steal stuff. And then as you get older, probably you'd get better through trial and error. I thought, I wonder how I'd be different if I grew up in Soviet Russia. Maybe I'd be addicted to meth instead of pot. Crack instead of sex. Classical music instead of Grateful Dead.

All that.

We left at noon and arrived at the home improvement store at one. If you want to know the setting, it was cold. Freezing ass cold. And everyone was walking around in their orange aprons and dirty jeans and baseball caps, chewing gum and tobacco. Throughout the entire place, there was this hot-metal aroma that made your nostrils burn. And the chemicals, you could taste them on your tongue. It was Chernobyl, I swear. We were walking through the fallout in our hoodies and sweatpants, smiling every now and then, acting as normal as possible.

Just mother and daughter looking for some flowers. Some rosemary-and-lilac-hunters. Two home improvement fanatics who enjoy gardening together and seeing the fruit of their labor. Just normal folks looking for some greenery. No trouble-makers here—nope, not us.

The way my mother shopped, she didn't need the sweatpants or the hoodie. She was a natural all by herself. She just moseyed on down the aisle as if on a whim, except of course she knew exactly which aisle she was shopping and why, and started looking at various pots and soils and seeds and azaleas and lilies and roses and rhododendrons and rosemary and ferns and lilacs and the list could go on for days. She made sure she didn't just look at one specific thing. "Patience," she said, "ees ze only thing zat ees going to get you out of here alive. Otherwise, you're dead meat. You have to be smoother than smooth, Anna B.," she said. "Got eet?"

Got it.

My mom, she mostly called me Anna B. to show affection. For some reason, and to this day I have no idea why, it was more intimate, more personal to call me Anna B. instead of just Anna. Even my friends did it. I don't think they were trying to be cute, or make me seem cute—I just think they did it because everyone else did, so if they wanted to be my friend, they'd just call me Anna B. like everyone else. In Elementary School and Middle School and even High School, not once was there another girl with my name in the same class as me. So it's not like the teacher would ever have had to say Anna B. because there was an Anna C. or an Anna D. or anything. Maybe the teachers liked me that much, too. I don't want to boast or anything—really, I wasn't that well-liked in school. But people always seemed to like to call me Anna B.

When I was younger, I thought it was a curse of some kind. I really did.

Without looking away from the lilacs, she whispered, "Grab zem."

I grabbed them.

"Okay," she said. "Now put zem in your pants. In ze vaistband so zey'll stay. And make sure there ees no barcode anyver. And if you find one," she said, "rip eet off."

I held the little red flowers, turning them over and over again, looking for a barcode. I didn't find one, so I reached down and tucked their little stems in my waistband.

Thumbs up.

"Good," she said. Her face was white—there was a line of sweat down her nose. I thought of saying she's breaking her own rules, she's sweating, but I kept quiet. I remembered she knew what she was doing, even if she sucked at it.

"Okay, now," she said. "Now, ve need those rosemary seeds up there. Eet's a beet of a reach, but you should be able to get zem."

She breathed.

"You need to get good at thees—you need to know how to do all zees. Go ahead."

And me, the little black-haired, red-cheeked Russian girl I am, I stood on my tippy-toes, reaching with all my little might for the packets three shelves above me. I groped and, to be honest, I kinda laughed because I knew how stupid I must look, all stretched-out like that, reaching for an impossible goal—my mother, all the sudden she pushed down on my shoulders and told me hush.

pedro silva

All the sudden, the manager was walking toward us. He was opening his mouth, probably wondering if we needed help finding anything in his cute orange smock with his Manager name-tag and his balding head, he was opening his mouth.

And the first shelf started to tip over.

And then it hit the next shelf.

And then the next.

And my mother, she grabbed me and we were out of there in a flash. Faster than you can blink, with the seeds in my pocket. The manager, she told me later, hadn't had a chance to get a good enough look at our faces. "Besides," she told me one day when we were playing cards, "eet's not like he was focused on me. I'm ze adult. I'm ze one who'd get sent to prison. Not you, leetle one. You're just a helpless little girl with her mother. They don't pay attention to sheet like zees."

She put down her hand on the kitchen table.

I put down mine.

She had a run.

I had a flush.

I won.

Me.

Me, I killed innocent people doing their shopping.

I killed them.

I'm guilty.

I did it.

Me.

Now, when anybody asks me about flowers, about lilacs and rosemary bushes, I get angry. I don't cry or throw a fit. I just bite my lip and shake my head and tell them that I'm not that fond of lilacs or rosemary bushes. I usually tell them, no, I don't like them because, together, they smell like someone stuck a dryer sheet up their ass and farted. That way, I'm not really lying to anyone. I'm not telling them the truth, either. But I think that's maybe the noblest way to go about it.

It takes balls to outright say, "Yeah, I killed someone. Well, more than just someone. I killed a bunch of people, all at once. And you know what? I'm not too proud of it. But they weren't my orders. I was just doing my job." Except, the people in the military, they don't have their mothers telling them to steal rosemary bush seeds. The people in the military, they're just handed a gun and told to kill a bunch of people, whether or not they're innocent.

And shit: Who are you to say someone is or isn't innocent?

Who the fuck am I?

What I do at night sometimes, I'll pray for those people I killed. I'll talk to God and say, basically, I'm sorry I don't talk to you a lot, but I want to pray for those people I killed that one day at the home improvement store. I want to say I'm sorry. I want to ask for your forgiveness.

Really, the only reason I do that is so someone will forgive me.

I don't know these people so I can't go find their families and apologize.

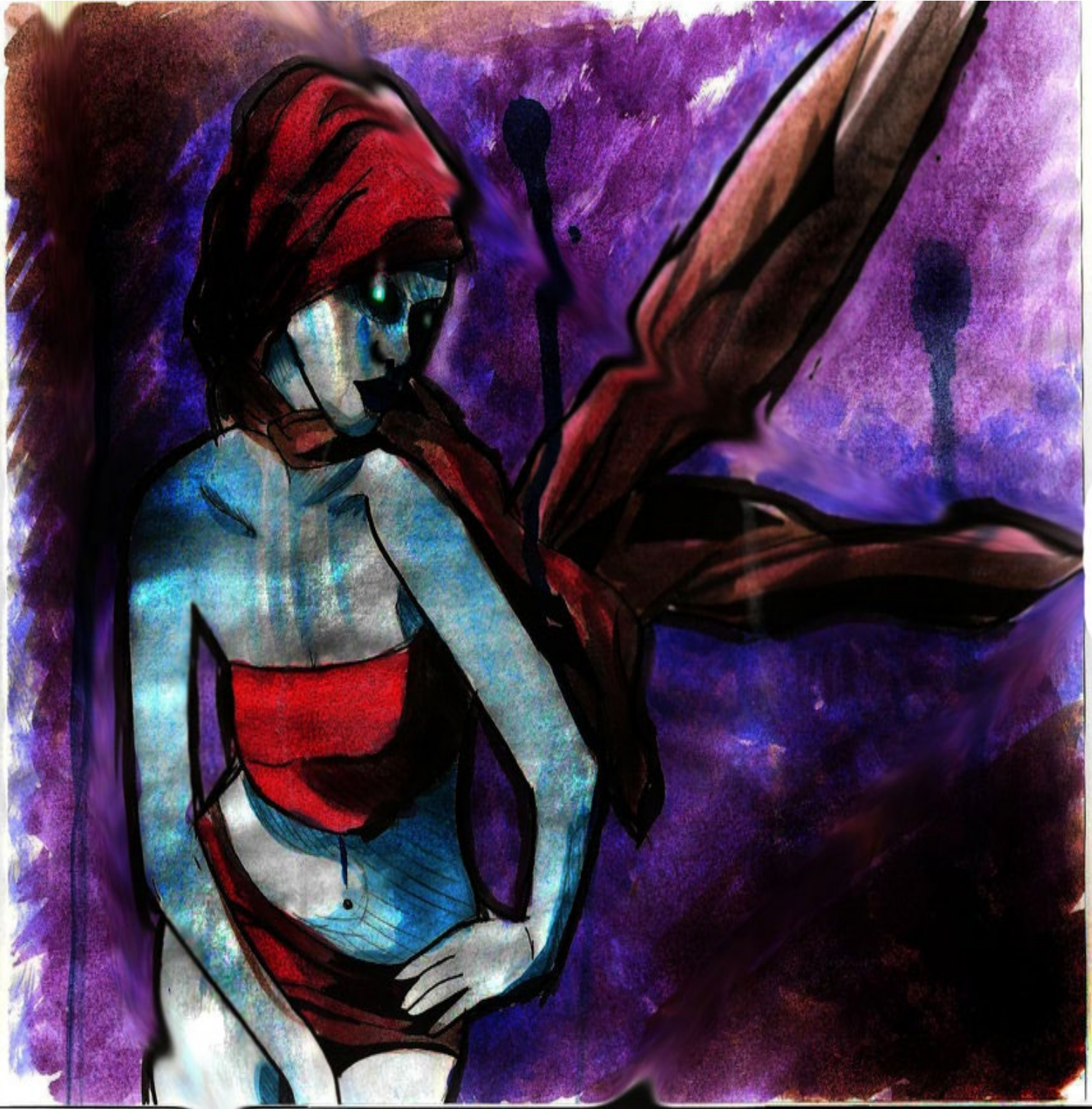
I can't find a reason, to be completely and totally honest, for you not to call me a monster.

pedro silva



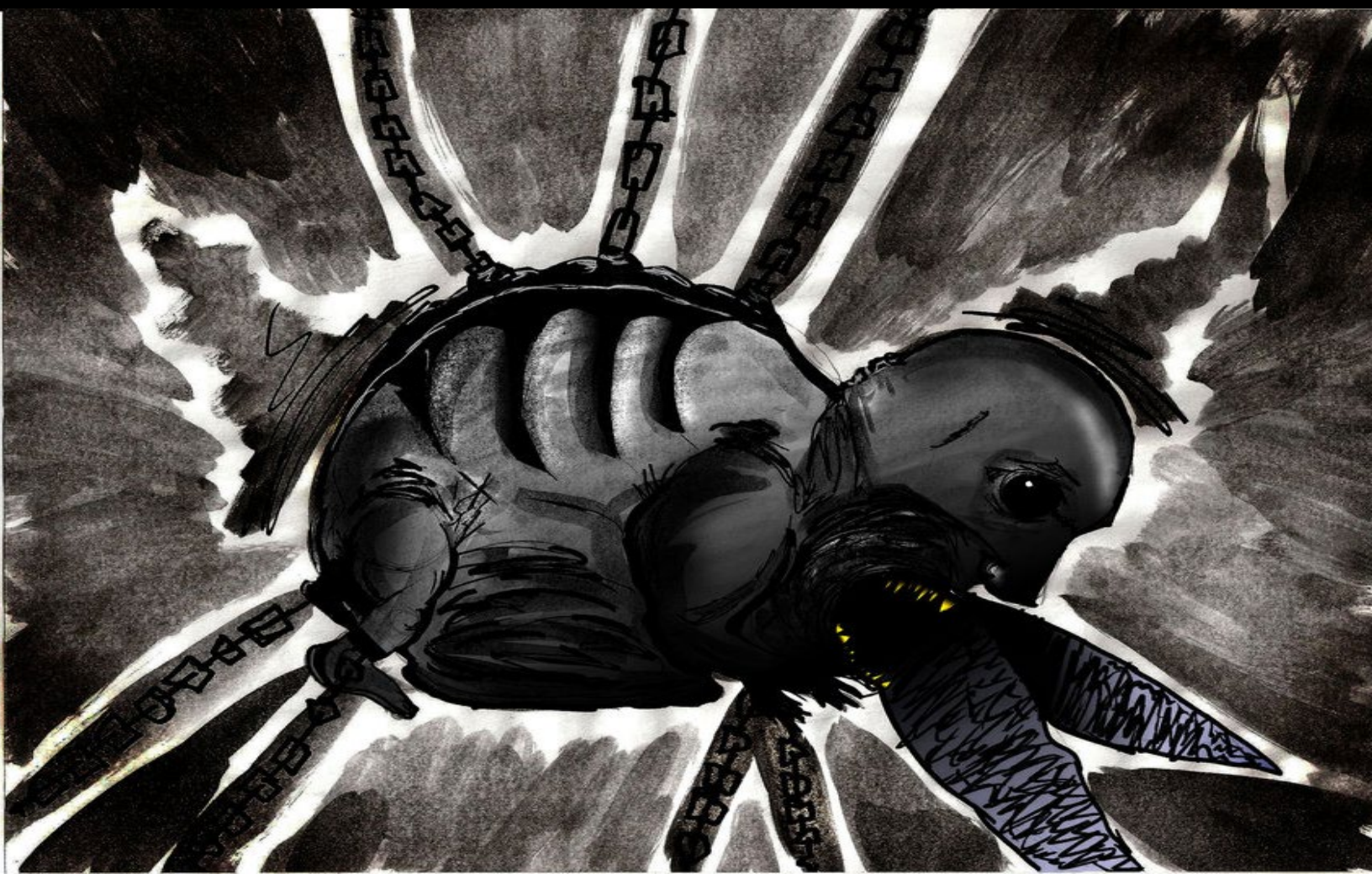
A beautiful madness

art by Adam "Snow" Graham















Special Thanks & Credits

Adam Graham: Pages 78-83, 85

<http://snowwulf.deviantart.com/gallery/>

Gothic Surrealist Nagrobek: Pages 14, 33 and the cover art

Site where you can find him: <http://nagrobek.deviantart.com/> tart.com/

Picture by Samantha Valery on Page 18

Princess Nightmare is featured on pages 22-28, Photos by Bombshell Pinups

You can find her on facebook @ www.facebook.com/ThePrincessNightmare

Background art by Joshua Dobson pages 5-13, 15-18, 29-32, 38-46

Art by Joe Whiteford, pages 48-54, etsy.com/shop/joewhiteford

His blog can be found at: <http://joewhiteford.blogspot.com/>

Exquisite Corpse Gallery by Sander Jansen, pages 68-73

Two illustrations of the Exquisite Corpse Gallery in collaboration with:

Zachary, <http://zacharycain.deviantart.com/> Luca (<http://lucarossimartini.deviantart.com/>)

His art can be found at: <http://sanderjansen.deviantart.com/>

Photo by Andrew Bock, pg. 32, 47, 56, 67 & 90

Illustration Page 55 & 77 by Kinga Britschgi

<http://kingabrit.deviantart.com/gallery/>

Background image on pages 34, 74-76 by Pedro Silva,

<http://www.morbido13.deviantart.com>

Art by Fabrice Gagos on pages 4, 44 and 59, 62, 84, 86 & 89

He can be found at: <http://svart-bd.deviantart.com/>

Thom Rozendaal, "Alice in the Realm of Time", p. 21

<http://PhanThom-art.deviantart.com>

Harry Flindt, pgs. 37 & 38, 55

<http://harry.quze.pl/obrazy>

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Goodbye.